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January, 1983

The GHOST of
TALL TREES
by Jessica Callow

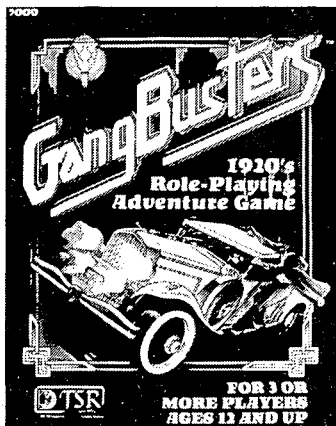
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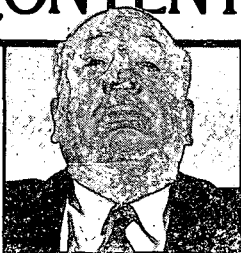
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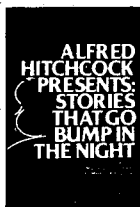
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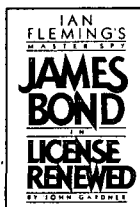
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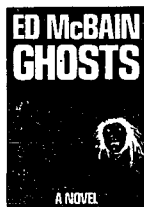
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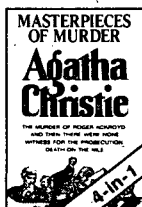
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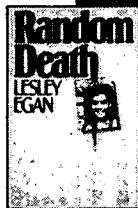
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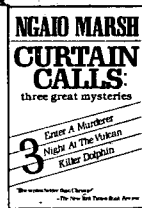
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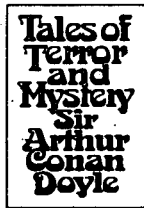
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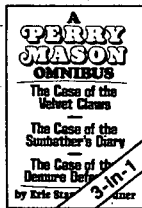
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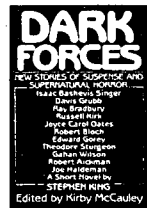
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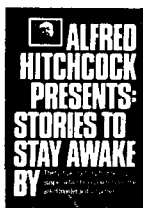
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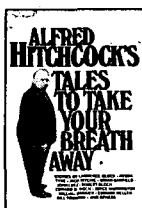
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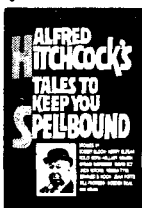
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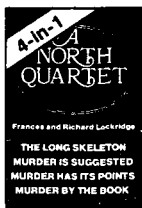
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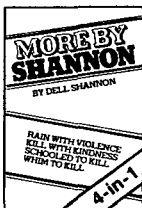
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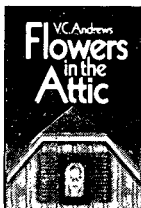
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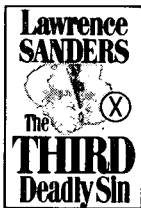
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Back during World War I, Don Marquis brought to the attention of his readers on the New York *Sun* the adventures of archy the city room cockroach, who could communicate with the world only by flinging himself headfirst at one typewriter key at a time (Marquis soon learned to leave a sheet of paper in the typewriter for him at night), and his insouciant friend, mehitabel the cat. Archy was a mostly free verse poet who had come back as a cockroach ("i see things from the under side now"); mehitabel's motto was "toujours gai, kiddo, toujours gai," or "there's a dance in the old dame yet."

Archy and mehitabel are famous now, and have been all these years since, for their common-sensical view of life, in which were mixed some incomparable humor and poignancy, and for their clear-sightedness in the face of adversity (both were well up on adversity). Less well remembered, however, are Marquis's other books, of which

there were many—stories and plays and other poems. Among the stories we have found for this issue's Mystery Classic one called "An Old Charge" that both fits our genre and recaptures a part of Marquis's, and archy and mehitabel's, view of things in general and human frailty in particular, and does it in an especially memorable way. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did.

Some months ago in this space (July, 1982), we reported on the mystery weekend that takes place every year in March at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York. At the time, we promised to let you know how to sign up for the 1983 weekend. To our chagrin, however, the following information will be useful only to our subscribers, not to newsstand buyers, to whom we offer all kinds of apologies. It seems that reservations are accepted *only* on December 1st, starting at nine o'clock in the morning, and only by telephone. The

number to call is 914-255-1000, and reservations have to be made for the entire weekend (all three nights) of Thursday, March 10th, through Saturday, March 13th. This year's theme will have to do with 1930's gangsters; Mohonk is being renamed The Lamster Hotel for the occasion, and the host will be Donald Westlake. The cost of the weekend had not yet been determined at this writing. The representative we spoke to at Mohonk tells us the weekend is so popular that this method of accepting reservations is the only way they can manage.

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FICTION

The Ghost Of Tall Trees

by Jessica Callow

Illustration by Marc Yankus

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“**T**all Trees” is the name of the Canadian farm where the Betterton family has lived for almost a century. It’s not that the trees surrounding the majestic old house are taller than trees elsewhere. It’s just that being high on the windblown Blue Ridge, and viewed from the valley below, they take on a stately loftiness outlined against the sky. My parents, that’s Dan and Myra Kidd, own the neighboring farm. I’m their daughter Muriel. My three brothers and I have, for as long as I can remember, been close friends of the younger Bettertons, as my parents have been more than just neighbors of Lloyd and Charlotte Betterton.

I like to remember Tall Trees when there was no ghost, and before Lloyd’s fatal accident with the tractor. We were all so young and carefree then, a romping bevy of young people; the only troubles we had were those that could be laughed away. Seven Betterton children there were; Jake, the oldest, taking the burden of the farm when his dad died; Frank, Nancy, Tom, Kim, Simon, and Lottie. Lottie and I were eight then, close as a pair of twins right

through school days. Even before high school I was in love with Simon. My senior by four years, he saw me only as "that little kid," his official name for me being "The Constant Kidd" since I spent more time at Tall Trees than at home, even afterwards when I was sixteen.

More constant at Tall Trees than I was, in those later years, was Molly Chase. Molly was Kim's best friend in high school, the pampered only child of Hilda and Bob Chase, owners of the restaurant-food market and motel in Shone, a hamlet five miles distant at the bottom of the long, sloping hill, where the busy highway runs from the city into resort areas to the north. Older than Lottie and me by two years, Molly had a patronizing air towards us, that is, until Kim suddenly married, leaving Molly more or less to Lottie and me; for Nancy, older still, was engaged by that time, too.

With Molly we hardly knew what to expect. From being a romping schoolgirl she would suddenly pose as a sophisticated grownup, with a "you kids don't know" air that nettled us both, and provoked retaliatory action, such as pretending we had a secret and driving poor Molly half crazy trying to guess what it was. Molly's act was for Simon's benefit, of course, for she made no secret about her feelings for him, he the real reason for her presence at Tall Trees. It flattered Simon, I suppose; easygoing, happy natured as he was, he thought it a joke. At the same time his admiration for her outstanding prowess at sports, as well as for her striking looks, was plain. As for Charlotte, his mother, she took to Molly from the start, Molly's glowing good health and strength her criteria. Admiring Simon and Molly dancing, living room rugs rolled back, she'd say: "Prize takers, the two of 'em, at any fall fair."

In Charlotte's eyes, I was "Myra Kidd's baby girl." She'd caution the others to "watch out for that little child." From this the family, except Lottie, took cue.

Small wonder Molly's infatuation for Simon. Tall, blond, blue-eyed, he had an engaging way that instantly put people at ease. So unlike Jake, whose thin, long face and unsmiling manner put people off. Sportsminded both Simon and Molly were, and had much to talk about. Lottie decided that Simon's lack of romantic response was what brought on Molly's somber moods, her peevishness toward Lottie and me at times.

"She knows you like Simon, too, Muriel. She resents your having been close to him all your life. She sees him watch out for you like Ma says. That makes her jealous of you."

My own thought was that the close bond between Simon and Lottie—a special tie the rest of the family did not share—made Molly resentful, that closeness with Simon her own urgent desire. In brotherly fashion he treated her, as he did me, which wasn't too polite at times. Occasionally, Molly's belligerence went as far as forbidding us to talk to Simon. And we'd complain to Charlotte about how bossy she was.

"Molly sees the friendship you two girls have," Charlotte said, looking wise. "She's on the outside of that. Simon, he's but a lad, don't know what he wants, and won't for a while yet. Lonely Molly is, always has been; needs a belonging with someone. Her folks—well, I know Hilda, too busy making money. Gives Molly all the money she asks for to get her out from underfoot. Never any lovin', d'y see. All that's amiss with Molly now is that she's growin' up and trying to catch up too fast with what she's missed."

Charlotte understood Molly; but that's how Charlotte was with all young people, recognizing all the different needs. As the days went by it was with Charlotte that Molly found an ally. Charlotte it was who became her friend.

Not that Lottie or I disliked Molly. More often than not she was lots of fun, and we followed her lead. At eighteen she had a worldliness that intrigued us, we greedy for facts, and she capitalizing on having met world travelers in her parents' motel, she putting her fantastic imagination to work regarding them. Her hazel eyes, black-lashed, held a haunting sort of stare. Her complexion of peaches and cream suffered no change from summer's heat or winter's searing winds. A skinny little brown pixie, I thought myself eclipsed beside her.

Summers, when we swam in the small lake on the farm, Molly's shining gold hair streamed out behind her, like wet silk on the water. She could outdistance all of us in a race to the tiny Crusoe Island, we puffing and splashing behind. On the sand, luxuriating in the sun, that wealth of tresses would turn again into rippling gold across her perfect back. Proportioned as she was, Aphrodite had nothing better to offer; it was hard to take eyes off her. And I'd resent my almost black, straight-as-pumpwater hair, dangling on my thin brown back, seeing Simon aware of no one but Molly. Little comfort was Lottie's praise for my violet blue eyes, that looked to her like "wet amethyst." "Muriel, you're the only person in the world, I bet, who has purple eyes."

The two of us talking one day, Lottie said, "They'll marry. Mother

says so, and is all for it. Molly's so strong and healthy, she'd have healthy children for Simon, is the way Ma looks at it. Simon says he's not going to marry. Molly, she'd like to get married tomorrow, so long as it was Simon."

We went into gales of laughter about that, and Molly, suspecting we laughed at her, threw a roaring tantrum. Once, just to get her goat, I said that Simon had promised to marry me. In a towering rage she pinned me down on the ground and screamed, "Don't say that, you little snip. Don't ever, ever say that!" The wildness in her eyes, her strong hands hard on my throat, had terrified me. Breathless with rage she was at me.

Winters, when the lake was frozen feet thick, we'd clear off a broad patch and skate. Oil lanterns that were hung around, or a pale yellow full moon, changed our small white world into a fairyland, in which we glided about to music supplied by an old windup gramophone Simon kept in the shed. So cold it was sometimes that we'd hear the trees crack, a sound like pistol shots. And cold though it was we'd light a bonfire at the edge of the lake and toast hot dogs. No ghost then at Tall Trees.

Spring, and the lake was a treacherous place. Trees, uprooted by torrents that roared down, were flung like matchsticks into the lake. Winds threw great slabs of ice to lacerate the shoreline, tearing great trees loose and heaving out rocks and soil. And then it would all suddenly subside. Trees cautiously put out pale green leaves, lacy, delicate. While from deep leaf mold below, the trilliums pushed bravely up, and in the moment of their blooming it was officially spring.

Only in the bush could the trilliums be found, the three-petaled woodland lily that is Canada's national flower. White ones and maroon, damp tree-shaded spots their habitat, a reincarnation of myriads of fallen tree leaves; so many springtimes.

Almost as much fun as the lake was the huge maple tree growing close to the rambling old house. Widebranched, a giant of its kind, its encircling arms reached out and up even to attic windows and the grey slate roof above. The treehouse, built by the boys, was adventure as thrilling as any storybook. And where casements opened into a leafy bower we'd climb in and out from attic windows, nimble as monkeys, exploring the upper reaches of the branches.

And then came the war. Tom and Simon it was who went, together. Simon twenty then, Lottie and myself both sixteen. A heavy pall of gloom settled over Tall Trees. Laughter ceased overnight.

Youthfulness had sped. Even Nancy's wedding seemed to be a solemn affair. Then Frank married, and moving away left only Jake, Charlotte, and Lottie to run the large farm. But there I was, the Constant Kidd still, frequently sitting in the tractor seat, ploughing the furrow under Jake's precise and colorful direction, brown as a nut and half naked in the hot sun.

Lottie, dairymaid she was, running the milking machine and doing other related tasks. Molly, too, she with Charlotte, making cheese and butter, fine cooks they both were. And how we stuffed ourselves at the long, scrubbed kitchen table!

Before we realized it, two years had slipped by since Tom and Simon went away. Then came the real grief. Tom would never return. That was when hope seemed to die. And Molly brooded and became sullen and silent. Charlotte went about looking redeyed, quiet-voiced now, not yelling at anybody any more. And Jake, I'd never noticed until then, had grey hair.

Surprisingly, it was Molly who regained her spirits first. Returning from a trip to Toronto one day, with twelve yards of heavy white satin, and what looked like a whole bolt of white tulle, as well as a few miles of lace.

"Simon is coming home, soon," she said. "I feel it. I know it. I must have my wedding dress ready!"

The effect of this on Charlotte was miraculous, and the two of them spent hours poring over pattern books. Then, laboriously, they went at the scary job of cutting that expensive white satin. The job done, Charlotte mopped her face.

"Never in all my life have I cut anything the price o' that," she panted. "Scared me half to death. I tell you, I feel like I've run ten miles."

Out in the barn, sitting on a bale of hay, Lottie and I talked. "They're cracked, the pair of 'em," Lottie said. "Simon hasn't given Molly a ring, nor promised her anything. There's nothing official, never has been. It's my mother who has got Molly into this thing. Muriel—"

I waited for Lottie to go on, but she sat silent, seeming full of worrisome thoughts.

"Well?" I said, finally. "There's something you know, isn't there?"

She nodded. "Muriel, there's something I've got to tell you. That last letter I got from Simon, there was—well—there was a page that I didn't show Mother and Molly, or anybody. Simon asked me not to."

"Yours and Simon's secrets, still?"

She nodded. "There's a French girl. I think Simon's very lonely, and grieving for Tom, and for all of us here."

From her buttoned shirt pocket she pulled Simon's letter, the page that only she had read, and handed it to me.

"Don't tell Ma, or Molly, but I've met a little French girl," I read. "Her name is Musette Le Farge. I'll write Ma if it turns out that Musette feels about me the way I feel about her. No sense getting anybody upset if Musette turns me down. It's like a miracle how different she can make me feel, like it's all worthwhile once more. When I first met Musette, she made me feel like I'd met somebody from back home. The Constant Kidd, that's who she's like. Really looks like her, would you believe! Same dainty pixie type with smooth dark hair. Same serious deep violet eyes; same slow smile, too. Those expressive eyes, they look at me as though she likes me a lot—I hope. It was that look made me feel I'd met someone from back home."

I couldn't stop the tears from raining down my face. "He's going to—Simon, he's going to marry her, Lottie." I handed the letter back. "Lottie, even her name is a bit like mine."

And there was Lottie crying, too. "I wanted you to know, Muriel, so you wouldn't wait for him any more. I know how you feel." She buttoned the letter back into her shirt pocket. And there we sat on the bale of hay, thinking about Molly in the house sewing her wedding dress, and thinking all the while about Simon.

After a while Lottie said, "Who cares about the dress? It's Molly that's going to be the disaster."

"Your mother, too. Oh, Lottie. Simon is going to bring Musette here!"

Lottie's slowly nodding head told me that she'd already faced that. "He'll bring her here, and what do you suppose will be the reaction?" Her generous mouth was in a grim line; it is one of Charlotte's mannerisms. Lottie, named for her mother, looks almost exactly like Charlotte. Bright blue critical eyes, blonde hair, two fat pigtailed pinned tightly about her small head. Very neat . . . She doesn't fuss over people, but stands back, almost as though unfriendly, at first. But there's no more loyal or kindly a person than Lottie. So like Charlotte.

"Oh, Lottie, they'll hate her!"

Lottie's head went up and down, slowly. "And that would make Simon and everybody unhappy here. The misery at Tall Trees is

a long way from over. A whole new chapter has begun."

She couldn't have known how prophetic her words were.

And then came Simon's letter to Charlotte. It astounded us all, but to Charlotte and Molly it was the knell of doom.

"I've obtained permission to marry," Simon's letter said, explaining how he'd met and fallen in love with Musette. And then, obviously, the letter had been set aside, and taken up later. "Musette and I are married. We'll be coming home before too long. I didn't tell you—didn't want you to worry—but I've been in hospital for a spell. I'm right as rain now, but am to be 'invalided out' as they call it. Musette and I expect to see you all soon. We've made all the arrangements."

The "little while" turned out to be three months, since the doctor refused to let Simon travel before that. Molly disappeared from Tall Trees for a while, visiting an aunt, so her mother said, somewhere in America. The wedding dress, finished and beautiful as a dream, Charlotte packed away in a trunk in the attic. So silent she was after that; her weatherbeaten, lined face grew bony, and thin. The bright blue eyes sank into her head, and had a faraway, wistful look in them.

And then Molly came back, seeming like her old self, even more cheerful, surprisingly. Yet in her eyes was a different look that made me sad, as something of her hopelessness showed.

"Have you noticed, Muriel," Lottie said one day, "how sometimes Molly lets her thoughts slip out, and she doesn't seem to notice? She's got you mixed up with Musette. And once, when I thought she was dozing, she suddenly said, 'Yes, the big maple in full leaf will be a perfect backdrop for my wedding dress.' Muriel, she still thinks she's going to marry Simon. D'you suppose this business has affected her mind?"

A few days later, from Hilda Chase, Charlotte discovered that Molly's visit to the States had been a stay in a special institution.

"I don't intend any sort of unneighborliness," Hilda told Charlotte, "but I want you to discourage my Molly from visiting your place. She'll get over this if we can get her interested in something or someone else. Always highstrung was Molly."

Charlotte did what she could to discourage Molly, as kindly as she could, but her considerate way with Molly served only to make Molly want more than ever to spend her days at Tall Trees. But soon both Molly and myself would have to stay away, for Simon and Musette were coming home.

We met them, of course, a welcome deeply emotional, since it made us grieve again for Tom. So sweet and gentle Musette was, feeling strange, and homesick already. Following their homecoming it was rarely that I visited Tall-Trees, for Lottie left to go to nursing school. It was Charlotte's telephone call that brought me back, some weeks later.

"Muriel," Charlotte said, "our little Musette is so lonely here with an old fuddyduddy like me who doesn't understand the parley voo language she talks in. She's trying her best, poor lass, to fit in. And I'd stand on my head for the two of them if it'd do any good. But if you would—I mean, somebody young like yourself she's needing to talk to. Seems like I recall you got some parley vooing at that high school."

And so I went back to Tall Trees and, like Simon, came to love Musette. Homesick she was with a vengeance, but gradually, as we studied grade school English and struggled with my pidgin French, we came on laughter together. And Charlotte joined in, determined not to be left behind. Hearing that I was visiting Musette and Tall Trees, Molly began to come back, too.

"I wish she wouldn't," Charlotte said. "But how can I say she mustn't come? I think she's okay now, isn't she, Muriel?" Charlotte's eyes were anxious.

Molly seemed content to fit herself in, but I felt that Musette kept her at a distance. There were times when I'd look up from the lesson books and find Molly staring at Musette in a way I found disturbing. And Musette found she could not concentrate.

Late summer it was when Simon and Musette told us about the baby coming. So excited and pleased they were. But by fall Musette had begun to suffer a despondency, giving way to sudden tears; her homesickness had returned in full force.

"Find some diversion for her," the doctor said. "She must get out and mix with people."

So Simon bought her a new car, and taught her to drive. Elated Musette was with that, sometimes driving over to have tea with my mother and me at our farm.

That fall, late October it was, Charlotte's attending the funeral of a brother in Toronto took her away overnight. Simon, having finished ploughing the large wheatfield directly in front of the house, decided to kill two birds with one stone; since he'd be driving Charlotte down he'd have his physical at the Veterans' Hospital. They'd both stay overnight at the sister-in-law's house. My own

mother, back from the hospital following minor surgery, had need of me at home.

"I don't like leaving Musette alone," Simon said.

"It's no place for her where there's death in the house," Charlotte said. "And you'd have to leave her to go to that Veterans place. Hours that'll take, you know. She can drive over and spend the night with Muriel. She gets a real kick out of that. Besides, Jake'll be here."

"Maybe Jake'll be here," Simon said. "Now that he's got himself a lady friend he'll be off like a shot once the chores are done."

I hadn't known any of these plans, Charlotte leaving it to Musette to telephone me, Musette seeming delighted with the arrangement. Wednesday morning they left for the city. It was Jake's telephoning me Thursday noon that brought the disturbing news.

"Hi, Muriel," Jake said. "Musette's with you is she? She didn't let me know she was spending the night, but I knew they'd talked about it."

"No, Jake. Musette's not here. No, she didn't spend the night here." The long silence told me that something was very wrong. "I'll come over, Jake, right away."

"Wish you would, Muriel. Sure wish you would."

At Tall Trees I found Jake pacing around. "She's gone, Muriel. She's run off. Her car's gone, too. I'd a nasty feeling something like this might happen. She wanted back to her own folks so strong. You could tell it every day. I told Ma, and Simon, too. No use me trying to tell them two anything. Talked I did to Simon about that very thing, and he says, 'Never, never. Musette'll do no such thing.' I didn't get home until real late last night. I was to Penetang for a while."

Poor Jake, he had formed a genuine attachment to Musette. She was Simon's happiness, he knew. And for Jake the "kid brother" counted above everything. It was not until much later that I discovered that Jake's getting home "real late" Wednesday night had been six o'clock Thursday morning.

"She wouldn't, Jake. Musette wouldn't," I said.

"Well, dammit she has, hasn't she! Don't stand there saying she wouldn't. She bloody well has. You can't trust 'em. Strangers is strangers. They don't put any real roots down. I'd be the same meself any place but here."

"But all her clothes—she's taken nothing as far as I can tell. She's driven somewhere, just exploring the sideroads, and has run

out of gas, I bet. Jake, d'you suppose she'd set off to where your mother and Simon are staying?"

Fuming, Jake decided to call his aunt's place in Toronto, in hopes of getting hold of Simon. He hung up with a crash.

"On their way home for the past hour. No, Musette hasn't been there. Good God! She's out with a car she barely knows how to drive, may be dead in a ditch somewhere. I think I'd better call Bob Field."

Bob Field, our local policeman, lives in Shone. At once he set about organizing a search for Musette. He, with my dad and brothers, Jake, and me, took the sideroads, both sides of the highway. But it was Simon, that night, who found Musette's car not far from the Get-Away Motel and Grey Coach bus stop on the highway. Simon, beside himself, talked with Musette's family by telephone. They knew nothing of her; repeated calls to France coming up with nothing. Nor could the police find any trace. Musette had driven her car to the highway, and vanished.

That winter I didn't go to Tall Trees until Lottie came home for Christmas. A strange Christmas it was, no Christmas at all compared to the happy times we'd all known there. Charlotte struggled to do her best for the family gathering. Molly came, staying but briefly; like a stranger she was, grown thin and pale. Looking startled when she saw me come in, at once she mumbled that her mother expected her at home. When she had gone, Lottie and I went for a walk across the fields to the lake. Gray and forbidding, the water reflected the sky's darkness. So still the trees, the only sound the faint cawing of crows deep in the forest; no other bird sound. The silence heralding snowfall—and as we stood, snow, like a blanket, shut off everything.

"Molly, she's still confusing you with Musette," Lottie said. "Just before you came she whispered to me, 'Too bad that Muriel went away.' And then, there you were, standing in the doorway. She's forgotten, I think, that Musette was ever here. She's convinced you're the reason she lost Simon."

"Poor Molly. She looks so different now. And Simon. He looks ill," I said.

"He's sick at heart, still. We all are. Muriel, how could all of this have happened to people so happy as we all once were? That must have been a hundred years ago. I try to reach back to it, but I can't find the way."

"You will, Lottie. We shall all find a way."

The snow was not off the ground that following spring when rumors got started that Tall Trees had a ghost. Someone from Shone, driving by on the sideroad late one moonlit night, reported having seen a woman dressed in white, floating, he said, on the lawn under the big maple tree. And, even as he watched, almost putting his car in the ditch, the apparition floated off upward and disappeared.

Some weeks later, the hired man from a nearby farm reported the same thing; told Jake about it.

"That one," Charlotte jeered. "On his way back from town with a skinful. Old Bustie would have barked had there been anything."

Disturbed, Jake made a point of watching, suspecting prowlers. Some thieving had been reported in the area. But three nights in a row, Jake watching from the barn, turned up nothing out of the ordinary; only that Bustie, the old Malamute, went about whining and pawing at the ground. And that convinced us that rumors had been started only because Musette's disappearance had never been solved. Her ghost had returned was what people were supposing. It doesn't take much to get people imagining things, even though they themselves have no evidence, never having seen anything.

About a month after that, late one night, my parents told me they, too, driving home, had seen the apparition at Tall Trees. A more down to earth pair than my mom and dad don't exist. "Plain as day," Dad said. "A woman in white was there. And then she suddenly disappeared; yeah, floated is the word, like she was enveloped in a white mist. And then in the shadows of that big maple she completely vanished. Something's sadly amiss at Tall Trees."

"Why didn't you go in and see right then what it was all about?" I said.

"Nothing to see. By the time your ma and me had got our wits together there wasn't a thing to see. Besides, it was pretty certain, at two o'clock in the morning, that the folks had all gone to bed. No lights anywhere. I'll tell Jake about it in the morning."

But it was two days later that Dad spoke to Jake, he and I driving over, me to get some plant cuttings that Charlotte had started for Mom. Charlotte has a green thumb like no one else I know.

"I can't believe you'd pull my leg, Dan," Jake said. "Simon and me, several times we've watched. Not a damn thing do we see."

"How's about we try at the next full of the moon, Jake? I'll come over. We'll get Bob Field. Bob's authorized to carry a gun, just in case it's any of that thieving crew we've been hearing about."

To me, Charlotte said, "Muriel, you'll not believe, but there's trilliums coming up and flowering under yon elm in the corner of the wheatfield. Never was a trillium there afore, ever, in the forty-odd years I've lived here."

We went out to the wheatfield where winter wheat, fresh and green, was inches high. Sure enough, beneath the elm trilliums were blooming. Short-stemmed they were, looking oddly lost and shivering in the chill wind that swept across the open field.

"Stunted a bit, I'd say. Hardly right for 'em here," Charlotte said. "They ain't exactly enjoying this exposed place. How they got here beats me."

The next full moon saw Jake and Simon prepared. My dad, along with Bob Field, joined them in the kitchen at Tall Trees for coffee.

"What d'you make of all this, Bob?" Charlotte asked. "Prowlers, ain't it, looking to steal something?"

"I've an idea it's somebody after buying your place, Miz Betterton," Bob said.

"Buying! But we've no intention of selling, never mentioned such a thing. Me, with sons to take over, wouldn't think it!"

"So right. Everybody knows that. So some smarty who's got ideas to make you an offer is creating bargaining power. Thinks to turn your minds if there's something against the place. We'd better nab the crafty schemer before something worse happens."

"Can't think of a single soul who'd do a thing like that," Jake said. "Thought at first that it was a prank, then thought it was prowlers. Now, I don't know."

"It's no prank," Bob said. "It's time to take this seriously. Tonight I got a feeling we'll find out."

The moon, full and yellow, stood over the roof of the barn. Inside, the four men sat quietly, watching through the partly open door. In the house, lights out, Charlotte and I waited.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd take part in such fairytale goings on," Charlotte whispered. "Ghost watchin'. Now if that don't beat all!" She stretched out on the living room couch. In Jake's Lazy Boy chair I made myself comfortable.

Time seemed to stand still. The grandfather clock in the hall ticked the moments away, ponderously. We dozed, and stirred again, guiltily, then both fell asleep. It was the screaming that jolted us awake, and Bustie's wild barking.

As the men told of it afterwards, the silence had them keyed up for a while, then they found themselves yawning. Old Bustie had

wanted to follow them into the barn, and morosely had obeyed Jake's order to stay on his mat on the verandah. Suddenly, Bustie had sat up, giving a gentle "wuff," and then had gone trotting out over the lawn, nose pointing to the pine coppice and the orchard. Tail wagging, the men noted, someone he knew. And there came the sound of a woman softly singing. Hardly believing, the men watched as Molly Chase came over the lawn to the foot of the big maple beside the house. Bustie ran to her, softly whining.

Swiftly Molly climbed the tree to the attic window, and disappeared inside. The men in the barn waited. Presently, down she came, a figure in white from head to toe, her arms full of the white satin train of her wedding dress, even so maneuvering easily. Bustie's tail thumped the grass where he waited, seeming to know the routine.

And Molly laughed and danced, singing quietly, the tulle of her veil floating out and about her, white mist rising on the gentle breeze. And as Bustie leaped up playfully, matching her mood, she took his paws and danced with him, he staggering about on hind legs, licking her hands meanwhile.

"Your ghost," Bob Field whispered. "Never, ever, would I have dreamed of this."

Pushing open the barn door, the men came quietly to where shrubbery bordered the lawn. "She'll get back up the tree, which is how she does the disappearing bit. We'll make sure she gets safely down, and then we'll go have a talk with her folks about this. Must have left her car off down the road."

"Listen!" Simon whispered. "She's saying—she's talking about Muriel." The men drew close in an effort to hear the strange monologue:

"Oh, Bustie, all that time he loved Muriel. Why didn't I know? I had to make her go away. I wish, oh, I wish I hadn't made Muriel go away, because she took me with her, so far away. I promised I'd plant the trilliums for her. I hadn't wanted to—to—but she came back, Bustie, I saw her. Of course, it's all been a nasty dream, a nasty, wicked dream."

And then Bustie, sensing movement by the bushes, barked, and went leaping to where the men were. Molly, seeing them, started to scream, and to run. The bloodchilling, desolate screaming went echoing through the night. And there we all were, milling about and making no sense. Then Charlotte yelled, "Where is she now? Where did she go?"

"Across the field," Simon said. "My God. She's headed for the lake."

All of us went tearing across the field, Bustie racing ahead, and came to the lake. But nowhere could we see any sign of Molly. Presently, we spotted a large spruce torn from its moorings by the spring thaw, its roots sticking up. It was the only thing moving in the water, gently rising and falling; sending ripples in wide rings to Crusoe Island. And then, in the gleam of moonlight, there floated up the bride's white veil. Slowly it spread across the top of the water.

It was too late for Molly when the men came to where she was, where the tree branches, water-sodden, clutched her satin train, pulling her down. Good swimmer that she was, all her effort had only further entangled her, the satin train a winding-sheet about her.

It was a night with no ending. Hours later, in the wheatfield corner, on our knees beneath the old elm, we wept, the trilliums marking the spot where Musette lay.

The years have softened the stormy experience, but memories will never go away. For we who knew and loved Musette there will always be a ghost at Tall Trees. Nor shall we seek to change that. For Charlotte there are grandchildren, laughing and playing on the grass, our dark memories with no power to tarnish their bright future.

Although we've been married a year now, Simon frequently calls me Musette. But I remember what Musette told me: "He called me Muriel when we first met," she said. "And for so long afterwards. Told me he fell in love with me because I looked like a girl back home." Simon loves us both. Why should I complain about that? I-loved Musette, too.

Tonight, I told Simon that soon he'll have to get used to being called "Dad." His arms hard about me, he said: "If we call her Musette, would you mind?"

"No," I told him. "I won't mind, she'll help you remember Muriel."



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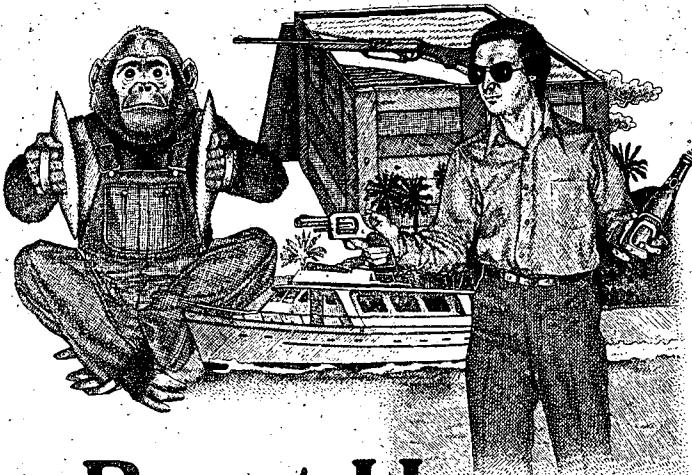
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FICTION

Dreams Don't Rust



by Brent Haywood

There's a monkey on my refrigerator. He's a plastic wind-up monkey with cymbals for hands, and his mechanism is jammed. I wind him up and leave him on the refrigerator where he waits, wearing his red overalls in silence. When I close the refrigerator door, he's jarred into action. He claps his cymbals and dances from side to side on his green plastic feet while I

peel open a beer. I don't know where he came from. He's been here since I moved in.

Sometimes he dances for about a minute and sometimes his mechanism jams after only a couple of clashes of his cymbal hands. Sometimes he doesn't dance for days. It might have something to do with how hard I slam the refrigerator door. If I were a deep guy I could attach all kinds of meaning to the

Illustration by Ron Chironna

whole thing: symbolic cymbals. But I'm not a deep guy. I just have a monkey on my refrigerator.

I had just finished a beer and was on my way to another when the phone rang. It's a wall model, mounted not far from the monkey. I postponed my drinking long enough to answer. The voice on the other end belonged to Jack Lucas.

"I have a hot one for you," he said.

"I drink mine cold," I said. I'm known as a wit, but Jack ignored my humor.

"Be home in half an hour?"

"Let me check." I let the phone dangle and opened the refrigerator. A jar of mayonnaise and a half pound of something green that used to be a hamburger. No beer. "Jack, I'm fresh out. Better meet me at the Maple Leaf."

"Right," he said. "Half an hour." I hung up the phone and slammed the refrigerator door. The monkey didn't do a thing. Maybe he needed winding. I didn't slam the door out of anger or frustration. I slammed it because sometimes the latch doesn't catch otherwise. I wound the monkey and left.

The Maple Leaf is a bar three blocks from my apartment. It's a quiet place on a hot Saturday afternoon; neighborhood people listening to R&B on the juke, playing a little chess, or doing

their laundry in the back room. I carried a beer over to an empty table and waited for my friend the reporter.

My wait was shorter than my beer. Jack got himself one at the bar and joined me.

"Where y'at, Jack?" I said.

Jack didn't have time for greetings. He took a gulp of beer and said, "Ever hear of Paul Bacardi?"

"Sounds familiar. Bacardi—like the drink?"

"Yeah, like the drink. Also like the ex-cop. You ever read the papers?"

"Only when I need a good laugh." That wasn't quite true. A month before, Jack's weekly rag had run a feature on the New Orleans police. Paul Bacardi got a lot of ink. Seven years on the force, a man who loved police work—you have to love it to go that long on cop pay. He worked hard, maybe too hard. His file got fat with misconduct complaints. There were commendations, too, but none of them carried any weight after the Chalmette case.

It was a barroom killing. Three off-duty policemen had argued with some local patrons—one of those foolish drinking arguments. A local boy had apparently pulled a knife. Bacardi had used his gun. The other two cops were still on the force, but Bacardi's record had caught up with him.

I asked Jack: "Is Bacardi still appealing his suspension?"

"He is, but he doesn't stand a chance. The chief of police has already taken too much heat over him. Even his brother officers wish he would fade away. He's an embarrassment—the kind that makes it hard to be a good cop, or any kind of cop."

"So what does this have to do with me?"

Jack took a quick look around, then started talking. "Listen. This is really big or it's nothing, but Bacardi called me this morning and I met with him right before I called you. He told me a story just wild enough to be true."

"I'm listening."

"Ever hear of a place called Saint Lucia?"

"Is it over by Westwego?" More wit for Jack to ignore.

"It's an island in the Caribbean, a tiny independent country. Some apparently well-financed mercenaries are planning a coup. Paul Bacardi has been approached. I guess they like the way he handles a gun."

"What's the pay?"

"Expenses. But if the coup's a success, they make Bacardi head of the island's police force."

"Sounds like a dream—the kind a Paul Bacardi would jump at. Why'd he come to you?"

"Good question: He's gone to the police, too—says he wants to play double agent and has

their cooperation. So far he doesn't know who the big money is, but he thinks he can find out. The only way I can figure it is that Bacardi thinks the coup won't work and he wants to make it work for him. Something like this could get him reinstated, especially if the press comes down on his side. In this case, I'm the press."

I let all this sink in while Jack made another trip to the bar. When he got back, I asked, "What else do you know, and what do you want from me?"

"I've told you all I know. I want you to watch Bacardi. It's too big and crazy a story to have to play from his angle. One source isn't enough, especially a source with Bacardi's record."

"Where can I find him?"

"I left him in the Crescent, down on Magazine. You might still find him there—he was looking to hook into one when I left."

"He's good with the big stick?"

"I hear he's the real thing. How's your game?"

"I don't shoot with real pool players. Is he a regular down there?"

"Everyone in the place knows him, except the transients. I imagine they get to know him, too, if they think they can play."

"Maybe I'll go on down there and think I can play."

There was still plenty of day left when I got into my car. It's

a 1966 Plymouth Valiant—the kind your grandmother drove only on weekends—and that's the only time I drive mine. I'm not even sure the pushbutton transmission works on weekdays. I pushed the drive button and let the Valiant chug over to the river road.

It's too hot to think in New Orleans in the summer, but I gave it a try anyway. The river road turned into Magazine at Audubon Park and I thought about why I'd never made it as a private dick. It was a dream I'd had for a long time, a dream of being the kind of detective who, for a small fee plus expenses, walked into strangers' lives and with a little smooth talk and fast thinking solves mysteries before walking out again, always unruffled, always untouched. But people don't want the mysteries in their lives solved. There's great potential in the unexplained, untempered hope in the unexamined. People resent your tampering with that hope. . . .

Or maybe I just didn't like divorce work. Either way, I had wound up working the graveyard security shift in a Poydras Street office building, and now I was on my way to see an ex-cop with a reputation and likely as not a few dreams of his own. I told myself I was doing it to help out a friend, but I knew that wasn't true; Jack Lucas

knew it, too. My trip down Magazine Street to meet Paul Bacardi had to do with something else, an interest in why people do what they always do. It was an interest I shared with Jack Lucas the reporter, an interest that in my case rarely went beyond people's actions to the people themselves. Anyway, that's what I was thinking about before the heat made all my thoughts fade into the summer afternoon haze.

The Crescent is down on lower Magazine, a block before it becomes a one-way street. It's called the Crescent because New Orleans is called the Crescent City—that kind of place. The smell of stale beer makes it hard to get in the front door, but if you get past the bar the smell changes to chalk and talcum and leather and felt.

I made my way to the back of the place, and an unhappy looking fellow brushed by me on his way out. He carried a custom-made cue case under his arm. The guy who had probably made him unhappy was returning a warped and battered cue stick to the wall rack. People who play with cues from the wall rack are either lousy or want to look lousy. I'm the first kind of player. The man hanging up the badly warped stick was the second kind. I'd seen his picture in the papers. It was Paul Bacardi.

Four tables were spread out between us. The one nearest the bar was open, so I pumped in a couple of quarters and racked up the balls. Every player in the place had seen Bacardi fleece the guy with the custom cue—Bacardi would wait for fresh meat before he played again. I was hoping he'd wait at the bar where he could get a good look at what kind of player I was. I pulled a reasonably straight cue off the rack and began to warm up. I heard Bacardi order a beer, and between weak shots I got a good look at him. His black hair was brushed back and sat like a helmet on his head. I knew him to be around thirty, but he had the clear, unlined face of an eighteen-year-old, a face that never worried, maybe never gave a damn. He was just under six feet tall. There was a bulge in his sports shirt just above his doubleknit pants, the beginning of a spare tire. His forearms were hard, thick muscle and went with his hands, well-formed, strong fingers that never stopped moving, yet never seemed to move without purpose or without grace. He didn't hold his glass of beer. It hovered there in his hand, weightless and seemingly untouched. I wondered if he was good with women.

It had been years since I'd last shot pool but I wasn't doing

too badly. I'd run three or four in before I'd get myself in trouble and need to cut an impossible angle to keep my run going. I missed those but I put together a combination or two that looked pretty good. I was shooting the eight ball when Bacardi put two quarters on the table and walked to the rack for his stick. I was his meat.

I didn't have any plan at that point. I only figured I could find out more about Paul Bacardi by meeting him than by following him around, and shooting pool was the best way I could think of to meet him. I sank the eight and he came back with the same crummy cue.

"Lag for break?" I said.

"No, go ahead. Eight ball for a beer?"

"Sure."

He racked them up and I broke, putting down a solid. I put in two more and then missed, the sort of mistake that costs you against a real player. But Bacardi didn't take advantage. He put down a couple of easy ones and let himself miss a mildly difficult cut. He knew I wasn't the kind of player to shoot high stakes, and he was looking to string me out, to nickel and dime me along until I'd won enough from him to play a little more, and then a little more. That was fine with me. The more time we spent together the better. Maybe we'd

get to be good buddies.

It was my turn again and I got hot, putting four down before I scratched. Then I got the kind of lucky break you read about in pulp westerns. I remember it now as though it had happened in slow motion. Bacardi was at the opposite end of the table, waiting for the cue ball to roll down the return chute. The bar had gotten a little crowded, and a few patrons were watching our game. I noticed one in particular, a cracker-looking kid with long, stringy, dishwater hair who stood out because he was wearing a scraggy nylon flight jacket in that ridiculous summer heat. He was about four feet away from me, sweating, watching Bacardi with his hands in his pockets. Bacardi put the cue ball on the table and lined up his shot, a tricky side pocket cut that would leave him in great position if he sank it. Everyone watched him prepare the shot but me. I was fascinated by the cracker in the flight jacket. I was even more fascinated when he pulled a gun out of the jacket pocket.

I'm not fast, and I'm not particularly well coordinated, but I had just enough time. When the kid took aim, I swung the heavy end of the cue over my head. I swung hard. As the cue came down, I could see the kid's trigger finger tightening. The

cue hit his wrist with a crack an instant before the gun fired. The explosion scattered the spectators. Lead tore into the felt tabletop, nicking the three ball and putting it into a corner pocket. The gun fell from the kid's hand—his wrist was shattered. Bacardi stood up, amazed.

He was my meat now.

I bent over and picked up the gun. It was a cheap .22 revolver, the kind punks all over America use to hold up gas stations and liquor stores, a Saturday night special. The kid in the jacket was staring at his smashed wrist, still sweating as fast as he could. He was a little disoriented; I don't think he had seen the pool cue I was swinging until it hit him. When I picked up the gun, the kid looked up from his wrist to Paul Bacardi, and then to me. I'll never forget his face. It wore a look of utter helplessness, of complete and hopeless defeat. He had wanted something more than his own life, had devoted his miserable life's energy to that thing, and now he was never going to get it and he was still alive besides. He looked like a puppy that had been hit by a bus. Later I found out who he was. Bacardi had killed his brother in that bar in Chalmette.

The police weren't long in coming, a young, tough-looking cop and an older, more easy-

going cop who was probably a lot tougher than his rookie partner. The younger one took my statement and told me I'd probably have to appear in court. The older one and Bacardi seemed to be old friends. They talked a while. When they finally took the kid away, I was already standing at the bar. Bacardi came up behind me. "Mike Prophet, huh? I'm Paul Bacardi." We shook hands. "Let's get away from this dump," he said. "If you got nothing better to do I'd like to buy you about a thousand beers."

I had nothing better to do.

Bacardi drove a high powered Z-28 Camaro that didn't make any better time than my Valiant through the slow, summer-paced New Orleans traffic. I followed him across town to Liuzza's, a good neighborhood place where the draft beer is served in thick, frosted glasses as big as fishbowls and the waitresses all talk like they grew up in the South Bronx: "Hey thea, dawlin', what kin I getcha?"

Bacardi and I started with a couple of those beers and a plate of onion rings. I could hear the waitress placing our order in the back: "Draw two an' drop some!" Bacardi was turning in his chair and looking around. He might have been looking things over the way people do when they first come into a

place, or he might have been looking for someone. When our beer came, he held his up.

"Here's to the way you handle a cue," he said and we drank. "Too bad you can't shoot with it as well as you swing it."

"Maybe I can," I said.

He looked at me across his beer and smiled. "Yeah, maybe you can at that." We drank again. A little more than an hour had passed since a guy had tried to kill Bacardi, had almost done it. If that bothered him he wasn't showing it. He was waiting on a plate of onion rings.

The rings came and we ordered a couple of oyster poorboys, dressed. I heard the waitress in the back again: "Two erstas all da way!"

We dug into the rings and made small talk that led nowhere. The sandwiches came and we ate those, too. Drinking all day had made me forget how hungry I was, and eating made me want something besides beer. We moved to the bar and ordered whisky. Then Bacardi gave the small talk some direction: "So what building they got you watching, Mike?"

"Ten-eleven Poydras. I keep things quiet between midnight and eight. It's a job, no more."

Bacardi allowed what he thought was a meaningful pause and said, "Is that all you want from life? A job, no more?"

"I can't complain."

"Didn't you ever want to do something else, *be* somebody?"

"A security guard is somebody. Listen, thanks for the beer and oysters. I guess I'll be getting home." I got up from the bar stool, trying my best to look as if my feelings had been hurt.

"Hey, Mike, Mike, *listen*. Sit down, sit down. I didn't mean it that way. Let me tell you what it is." His already smooth voice got smoother, began to roll. "I got this dream, see? It's all I live for, this dream, and I'm gonna make it happen, I'm gonna make it work for me. Didn't you ever feel like that?"

"Sure. Everyone has dreams at one time or another. But dreams die, Paul." If it was schlock melodrama he wanted, I was going to give it to him.

He motioned for two more whiskies and leaned closer to me along the bar. His voice got confidential; we were buddies.

"Listen, Mike, I don't mind telling you, I've had some ups and downs myself—nothing you haven't read about. It's been in the papers. But this time I've got something going that'll pick me up and keep me up, me and a few men like me. Today I saw the way you work in a clutch, and I like it. I want you with me on this thing."

"I don't know what you're getting at," I said, "but it sounds like a pitch, and if it is, you're pitching the wrong guy. My sal-

ary barely covers beer expenses."

"Oh boy, do you have *me* wrong!" The whisky came and Bacardi put a five on the counter next to the change from the last round. "Money I got, money is nothing." He motioned toward the five to illustrate his point and the bartender took it away. Bacardi leaned toward me again. "What I need, Mike, is men. Men with dreams, men who have what it takes to make their dreams work."

This short speech was so clean it sounded rehearsed. Maybe there were cue cards behind the bar. I said, "All this deep talk is losing me, Paul. I appreciate the whisky and I hope you won't take offense, but I'm not a deep guy. Why not get to the point?"

Bacardi sat up straight. His voice got hard, more like a cop's voice. "All right, I'll get to it, but not here." He drank off the rest of his whisky, set the glass on the bar, and said, "Let's take a ride." I got a plastic go-cup from a stack on the bar, filled it with my drink, and followed him out the door.

This time I rode with Bacardi in the Z-car. It had gotten dark while we ate. We made our way over to Saint Bernard Avenue in silence, except for the occasional chatter from Bacardi's police band radio. From Saint Bernard Avenue Bacardi turned onto one of those mysterious

sidestreets that run on forever through the Ninth Ward. On every third corner an electric sign advertised Jax Beer, a good brand, I've heard. They quit making it ten years ago.

After about twenty blocks, Bacardi pulled over in front of one of the bars. He shut off the engine but didn't make a move to get out. I didn't either.

"Okay, Prophet, now I fill you in. Then you either come inside with me or I take you back to your car. Understand?"

"I'm listening." Bacardi's taste for melodrama was beginning to strike me as funny.

"Good. Ever hear of a place called Saint Lucia?" It was the second time that day I'd been asked that question. This time I just shook my head. I was afraid I'd laugh out loud if I opened my mouth.

"Not many people have. It's a small, independent country, an island in the Caribbean, a little bit of paradise. I'm part of a group of men who are going to make it our new home. We have the backing of businessmen from both Saint Lucia and the United States. We have secured a boat, and we have a sizable arsenal. The current government is corrupt, with the support of only a small, ill-equipped police force. The people will welcome a change."

I tried my best to look amazed. Bacardi read my look and con-

tinued his speech: "Sure, it sounds a little crazy, Mike, and that's one reason it can work. A man doesn't get anywhere without taking chances. Be honest with me, Mike. What have you got to lose?" This speech sounded rehearsed, too, even down to the pause before he said, "Well?"

I paused, too, finished the whisky in my plastic cup, and said, "Let's go inside."

The inside of the place was no more unique than the outside: a few tables, a ballgame on TV, a few guys at the bar, and an old man behind it—probably the owner. Over his head a dogeared poster read:

HELEN WAITE IS OUR
CREDIT MANAGER
SO IF YOU WANT CREDIT,
GO TO HELEN WAITE!

For a moment I wondered how many times I'd seen that same tired poster. I thought of trying to count all the sleepy backstreet bars where I'd killed time sucking down cheap beer and reading about Helen Waite, but Bacardi's voice interrupted my reminiscing. It occurred to me that I was getting a little drunk, that I'd better watch myself. Bacardi introduced me to a man named Billy and I watched myself shake his hand. Then I watched us all walk over to a table in a corner. There was

something familiar about this guy Billy.

As we talked, my head cleared a little. Bacardi told Billy about my antics with the pool cue earlier that day. If Billy was impressed, he didn't show it. He just nodded his head at the right spots. His sandy hair was on the long side, combed straight back, and he was dressed in a flashy, narrow cut sports shirt of cheap material and beltless slacks that were a little too long. He probably wore white socks. A couple of guys at the bar started yelling—big play in the ball game—and Billy looked their way nervously. I noticed he'd chosen to sit with his back to the wall, and then I knew what was familiar about him.

He was a vet. I'd never seen him before, but I'd seen plenty like him. He had fought and survived a long, ugly, heroless war only to come home to a country that wanted nothing to do with him. Whatever ideals he had clung to about being a good soldier and a good American had been torn away, leaving him with a wary, shaken manner and a set of daytime nightmares he could kill only partly with liquor and never with sleep. I wondered how long it had taken Bacardi to talk this guy into joining him. It couldn't have been long.

Bacardi finished telling his story, and we got down to busi-

ness. I was to meet Billy the following afternoon at a Slidell marina where I could see the boat and the guns. I wouldn't meet anyone else involved in the operation until the day we sailed. Only Bacardi and Billy knew the names of all the men: that was for our own protection. I thought of asking who was financing the operation, then decided to save that for later. I had a feeling Bacardi was keeping it to himself. I doubted that even Billy, who seemed to be an officer in this secret band of crazy mercenaries, knew who was signing the paychecks.

There wasn't anything else to talk about, so Bacardi drove me back to my car and my car drove me home. On the way I stopped at a Time Saver for a case of beer. A lot had happened that day and I wanted to sort things out.

It wasn't a cool night and my apartment was a hot box. I opened a bottle and put the other twenty-three in the refrigerator. The monkey started clapping and dancing as I closed the door. I took my beer to bed and never got past the first sweaty sip. The light was still on and the monkey was still clapping when I fell asleep.

I wasn't asleep when the phone rang, and I wasn't awake either. I had my eyes closed, but I could tell it was morn-

ing, a bright morning. My tongue kept trying to stick to the roof of my mouth and I knew better than to move my head.

The phone rang again, it kept ringing. It seemed to mean it. I told myself it was only a hangover and sat up.

I was right. It was only a hangover.

After a couple of tries I made it to my feet. When I got my balance I followed the ringing into the kitchen and picked up the phone. Then I unstuck my tongue and made a noise that was supposed to mean hello.

After Jack finished laughing, I told him what had happened. He said, "Nice work. So Bacardi's recruiting; he let me think he was a real outsider, barely involved at all."

"As far as I can tell he's the main man, after the men with the money. I still don't know who they are, and I doubt I can find out any time soon, at least not from Bacardi. There's another chance, though. I'm meeting Billy this afternoon to look at the boat and the guns."

"What time?"

"Keep it loose. Around two."

"Better move, bright boy. It's one now."

"Right. And I think it's time to drop in on the police. Tell them what you know, maybe find out what they know, if anything."

"Yeah. I don't like it."

"Neither will they if Bacardi's been holding out on them."

"For sure. I'll call you later this afternoon. You be careful, Mike." Jack was always telling me things like that. I got some tomato juice out of the refrigerator and wound the monkey.

I took the old highway across the lake to Slidell, a cool, pleasant drive over the water and past the fishing camps along Irish Bayou. The bars along the bayou advertised boiled crabs, and I realized I hadn't eaten since the night before. Maybe I could talk Billy into having lunch with me.

The marina wasn't more than a covered dock with a few slips for shrimp boats, mostly Lafitte skiffs. One larger boat looked like a converted deep-water shrimper, but I wasn't sure what it had been converted to. The hull had nice lines but the aft deck had been broken up into an odd arrangement of cabins and awnings that didn't look at all nautical. In the Gulf a summer thunderstorm would bring it down.

I walked down to the big boat and called for Billy. He came out of the pilothouse as I stepped aboard. He was carrying a greasy wrench.

"Come in," he said. "Air conditioning inside." I followed.

"Your boat?" I said.

"Yeah. It was my uncle's before he died." Billy closed the door to the pilothouse behind me. The cool air dried the sweat on my forehead.

"Nice," I said.

Billy nodded. "My uncle was a shrimper," he said. "I thought I might take it up myself, until I ran into Paul." There was a pause as Billy seemed to look me over. Then he said, "Nam?"

"No," I said. "I got lucky. High lottery number."

"Yeah? I enlisted. It seemed like the thing to do. I can't complain. It taught me how to fight. I guess it'll pay off."

"That right?"

"Come look." Billy opened a small hatch that led below. Warm air shot up and smelled like bilge. Billy slipped through the opening, and I followed.

It was hot down there, and dim. There were four crates, three nailed shut and one open. Billy reached into the open one and pulled out an oil-soaked rag. He unwrapped an Uzi sub-machine gun, made in Israel, the kind that comes apart so you can hide it in your vest pocket. He handed it to me. I'd seen guns like it on the TV news when a guy had tried to shoot the President. All the Secret Service agents had pulled machine guns out of their vest pockets, like magic. A nice weapon, if you liked weapons.

"Pretty," I said, and mo-

tioned toward the crates. "All Uzi?"

"The rest are M-16's. Paul has more Uzis stored in town somewhere. That one's just so everyone can get used to them. Know what I mean?" I said I knew what he meant. Then I put the fancy machine gun down and reached into the open crate. I moved a mildewed rag aside and pulled out a heavy rifle. Even in the dim light I could see that the gun was rusty, its mechanism jammed. Bacardi must have gotten them cheap—four cases of useless weapons. I looked from the rifle to Billy.

"Yeah," Billy said. "Pretty lousy. They're just for emergencies."

"Right," I said, as if that made perfect sense. We put the guns away and went back up to the air conditioning. Billy sat in a chair in front of the wheel—the driver's seat.

"These clowns around here think I'm going into the party-boat charter business. If anyone asks, you're a customer, right?"

"Right. I'll try to look rich." Billy nodded his head, glad that I got the idea. "When do we leave?" I asked.

"June 17th. It's the day they had the Watergate break-in." Billy smiled.

"Sounds good to me," I said and tried to mean it. It was

hard. I kind of liked Billy, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. It's just the way I am. Billy leaned back in the chair. I had a hunch he was about to say something I didn't want to hear.

I was right. He was relaxed and his Ninth Ward city kid accent came on strong.

"Ya know, Mike? I gotta tell ya. This whole thing is the best damn thing that's ever happened to me. I'm tellin' ya. I spent all that time in Nam, fightin', and when I came back nothin' made any sense to me. Nothin'. Over there I had it all figured out—the system, ya know? And then I come back and it's all gone ta hell. Then my uncle dies. I didn't hardly know the guy, really. An' all the sudden I got this boat. What I know about boats? Nothin'. But I figured I'll be a shrimper. What I know about shrimpin'? Nothin', I'm tellin' ya. So then Bacardi comes along with a Camaro fulla guns and *that's* somethin' I *know* about. Ya know?"

I said I did and I was only a little off the truth. Then I got farther off the truth and told him I had to be someplace. Then I left.

I drove back across the lake and I thought about Paul Bacardi and his crazy dream about taking over a small Caribbean country. After that I thought

about Billy—I didn't even know his last name—a guy with his own dreams, dreams about being the right kind of American, an American who fights for his country and earns its gratitude and respect. Billy had fought as his country had told him and had come home with nothing, a loser. Then an ex-cop with a carload of rusty guns had told him about a country where he could be somebody, a country that could be his. And Billy had looked beyond the rusty guns and the fast talk and had believed in Paul Bacardi's dream. Because . . .

I didn't know the because. I only knew what I'd seen, and I didn't like it, not any of it. I looked at my knuckles wrapped around the steering wheel. They were white, the blood squeezed out of them. That told me something, anyway. I unclenched my hands and tried to relax. I wondered how many more were involved in the plot, how many more like Billy. A good private dick would have known that. When you investigate a conspiracy to overthrow a country, you find out how many people are involved, even if they're all saps. You're also supposed to find out who's paying the saps. I didn't know that, either. Then again, a good private dick would have been getting paid by the hour instead of by the beer.

I hit the beginning of rush

hour traffic on the New Orleans side of the lake. It made me thirsty and I started thinking about the case of cold beer in my refrigerator. That made me thirstier. I was feeling bone dry when I turned off Carrollton onto Oak. I found a parking spot right in front. That made me so happy that I didn't notice the car parked across the street and halfway up the block.

The heat didn't bother me coming up the stairs—relief was near. I walked quickly through my sweltering apartment to the kitchen in back.

I saw the gun first.

It hovered in his right hand and pointed in my general direction. I stopped in the doorway. Bacardi was wearing sunglasses for some reason, and sweat was dripping off him onto the floor where sat. He looked at me through his dark glasses and said, "Hello, Mike."

I said, "Hello, Paul," and then the phone rang.

I was glad he didn't jump much. His trigger finger was near the trigger, and I had the feeling that the mechanism on this gun wasn't jammed. The phone rang again and Bacardi said, "That'll be Jack. Don't bother answering."

I didn't bother. Bacardi continued. "He called earlier. I told him I'd take a message, but he wouldn't leave one. I wonder if he's as good with voices as I

am." He waved the gun. "It doesn't matter. I knew it was him and now I know it's you."

I couldn't argue with that, so I kept quiet.

Bacardi gestured with his other hand. It held a beer—I hadn't noticed it before. Then I noticed the empty bottles on the floor around him. If Bacardi was human he was drunk. It was no sure thing but I decided to bet on it. It was my only bet.

The phone kept ringing. We let it ring. After a while it stopped. Bacardi took a long drag on the beer bottle, turned it up and let it drain down his throat. He might have been looking at the bottle while he drank, but the shades made it impossible to tell. The gun kept pointing my way. When he finished the beer, he let out a huge belch. Then he put the empty bottle down with all its empty friends. There was a real crowd. Finally he said, "What the hell are you, Prophet? A private dick?"

I had to admit it was a pretty good question. I thought a minute and said, "There was a time when I wanted to be." I knew that didn't qualify as a good answer.

Bacardi knew it, too. He shook his head slowly. Finally he said, "Don't mind if I do. Move slowly. I want you to live long enough to get me good and drunk."

I moved slowly over to the

refrigerator and opened the door. Of the case I'd bought the night before, there was a sixpack left. "Mind if I have one?" I asked.

"Go ahead on."

I took two out and closed the door. The monkey on top didn't do anything. I figured he had wound down a long time ago; the refrigerator had been getting quite a workout.

I opened two beers and slid one across the floor to Bacardi. Then I took a long drink myself. Bacardi watched me—or his dark glasses did—and said, "There was a time when you wanted to be a private dick. Ain't that something? What do you want to be now? What *are* you now?"

"I told you last night. I'm a security guard. I carry a clock."

"And what do you *want* to be?" Bacardi was getting loud and angry. I didn't answer. All my life well-meaning people have asked me that question and all my life I've hated it. I didn't like it any better at gunpoint. Bacardi kept talking: "No answer. You either don't know or you won't say because you know you'll never do it, never be what you want to be, never be anything but a beer-soaked security guard. You got no dreams of your own so you hook up with a punk reporter and mess up mine. You make me sick. It's gonna feel good to kill you." He paused long enough to

drink, then went on. "Yeah, your buddy the reporter called the chief's office, and some smart guy there figured out that what I was telling them and what you found out weren't the same. But the smart guy happens to be a friend of mine—I still got a few friends on the force—and he filled me in. It don't matter now, anyway. You've messed up Saint Lucia for me. It don't matter at all..."

He tipped the bottle up and finished it. I didn't like the mood he was in. I didn't think more beer would help it any, but I thought it might buy me some time and take away some of the advantage the gun gave him. Drunks don't shoot straight.

"Another?" I said.

"You bet."

I got him another and closed the refrigerator door.

The monkey started to dance.

The noise made Bacardi start, but when he saw what it was, he laughed. Then he did a funny thing. He held his gun in two hands and took aim on the plastic ape. I watched his trigger finger squeeze. When the explosion came, I jumped him. It's a small kitchen and I was across it fast. I didn't hit him gently. Foam and broken glass went everywhere. Bacardi went limp.

The monkey went right on dancing. Like I said, drunks don't shoot straight.

There was a set of cuffs hanging from Bacardi's belt. I guess he figured he might want to take me someplace before he killed me. He was already coming to when I snapped them on his wrists.

Right about then Jack Lucas showed up. He had walked from the Maple Leaf when I hadn't answered my phone, and he'd heard the shot a few steps down the block. He was out of breath. I told him to call the police.

The police came and took Bacardi away. Jack and I went down to the station, too, and on the way I told him about my visit with Billy and his guns. At headquarters I filed a complaint against Bacardi for breaking and entering and attempted murder. I thought about telling them he was really shooting at a plastic monkey, but the whole case was crazy enough already.

I let it ride.

Then Jack and I went back uptown to the Maple Leaf. I had to work that night and I wanted that lunch I'd missed, and maybe a game of chess to calm my nerves. Jack found a parking spot in front of the bar.

I said, "One thing I can't figure, Jack. If Bacardi really wanted the coup to work, why did he go to the police?"

"Same reason he showed up at your apartment after you busted things open. Revenge."

"I don't get it."

"Bacardi and the chief of police had been at odds for some time. The chief got tired of taking the flak whenever Bacardi got a little over-zealous in his police work. Bacardi got tired of being called down. The suspension was the last straw. It made Bacardi a little crazy. And I'm not sure he was too tightly wound in the first place."

"I'll buy that." We got out of the car and Jack continued.

"So Bacardi comes up with a plan to overthrow a small country. He finances it on a shoestring with his pool earnings—I'm convinced that there was no big money behind it after what you told me about the rusty guns. Then he goes straight to the chief and plays good cop. What was the departure date Billy gave you?"

"June 17th."

"He told the chief June 24th. Based on that, the police planned a full-scale ambush, complete with help from the Coast Guard. Meanwhile, Bacardi and his crew sneak away and bring off the coup a week early. The chief looks like a fool, and I put it all in the funny papers." Jack ordered a drink.

"A crazy plan," I said. "But Bacardi thought it could work. He really did."

"In his dreams," Jack said.

"Yeah," I said. "In his

dreams."

FICTION

A Case Of Mistaken Identity

by
Gregory S.
Hargrave



It was a blistering hot July afternoon, without so much as a breath of air stirring the endless rows of sweet-smelling corn, and the railroad tracks that slashed across the green fields toward town shimmered with the intensity of the summer heat.

A boy stumbled along the tracks, breathing hard with the exertion, his bare feet keeping to the creosoted ties. He carried a fishing pole in one hand—the hook at its tip still baited with a dried-out nightcrawler—and a large wicker basket in the other. The basket was awkward to carry and bumped against the boy's leg with each step.

The boy came to the place where the tracks crossed a drainage

Illustration by Ray Lago

ditch, a stagnant summer trickle that ran through a big metal culvert. The steep sides of the embankment were covered with daisies, clear up to the top where the corn began. He paused there for a moment, trying to catch his breath.

A bit hesitantly, he opened the top of the basket and looked inside.

It was still there, of course.

He slapped down the lid, shuddering. For a moment, he considered hurling the basket and its contents down into the weeds at the bottom of the ditch.

A white cabbage butterfly danced in the sunlight along the polished rails. Somewhere in the trees down by the river, the buzz of a cicada started up. In the distance, the clock in the courthouse tower sounded twice.

Gripping the handles of the basket tightly, the boy started for town. He ran.

As the courthouse clock struck two, Billy Hughes stepped from the heat and glare of Main Street into the cool interior of Al's Barber Shop. Billy—fiftyish, gray-haired, and prosperous—was a highly respected man in the little community of Seymour, Missouri; accordingly, he was very careful about his appearance and made it a point to drop in for a trim and a shave at least once a week.

"Afternoon, Mr. Hughes."

"Al."

Billy exchanged a nod with Sam Jeffers, a retired farmer who spent a good deal of time in the barber shop, shooting the breeze or thumbing through the same old yellowing issues of *Field and Stream* and *National Geographic*. As usual, old man Jeffers wore starched and pressed bib overalls, with a white cotton shirt buttoned up close below his prominent Adam's apple. His cheek was round with a plug of Red Man chewing tobacco.

Al helped Billy off with his suit coat, a light, hand-tailored affair of fine gray silk, and put it on a hanger. Billy took a seat in the barber chair.

"What'll it be today, Mr. Hughes?"

"Trim and a shave, Al. Same as usual."

Al draped him with a fresh cloth and went straight to work with his comb and scissors.

"Sure is a scorcher out there, ain't it?"

"It certainly is. The sign outside the bank says it's ninety-four degrees."

"Ninety-four! That's plenty hot. Wouldn't be too surprised if we got a thunderstorm later, the way them clouds are building up."

"At least it would cool things down some."

"We could stand some of that."

Al carefully parted Billy's hair. He had an unconscious habit of snipping the scissors rapidly between cuts, producing what to Billy was a restful sound; it affected him the same way the patter of rain on a roof at night affected other people.

Billy shifted his eyes toward Sam Jeffers.

For quite a while now he'd had his mind on some property the old man owned—already had some ideas for its development, even—but so far the old coot had stubbornly refused to part with it. Billy found this puzzling, and more than a little annoying. He knew for a fact that the old man needed the money. The corn he put out on it each year probably didn't even pay the property taxes.

So why the hell wouldn't he sell?

It always puzzled and annoyed Billy Hughes when people couldn't be made to respond to money. It just wasn't natural.

Al dusted a bit of talc on Billy's neck, studied the hairline above his collar with a critical eye, then snipped away at a few stray hairs. "I hear you bought up the old Thompson place."

"Yeah. The old lady's kids didn't have much use for it, I guess."

"They put her in a home over in Kirksville, what I heard."

Billy stole another glance at old man Jeffers. He was studying the magazine with an unusual intensity. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed comically.

"That's what they did. It's a damned shame she didn't have the sense to sell out a long time back, while she could have had some good out of the money. I made her a fair offer at the time."

"So what do you figure on doing with the place?"

"I haven't really decided yet. Probably I'll just hang onto it for a while. Sort of a long-term investment."

Al turned the chair around so it faced the big mirror on the back wall. "You want me to take a little more off the sides?"

Billy turned his head slightly from side to side, studying his reflection. "No. It's fine just the way it is."

Over his shoulder, Billy could see, as usual, the words "AL'S BARBER SHOP" on the glass of the front window; backwards, from the inside, they were restored to their proper order in the mirror image. Billy puzzled over that for a moment, thinking it odd that in all the years he had been coming in, this was the first time he had noticed.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Hughes. I've always kinda liked that old orchard up north of the house—you know—the way the blossoms make the air smell in the spring. I'd hate to think of it all bulldozed flat, and cut up for a new subdivision."

"I know what you mean, Al. Still, it's bound to come sooner or later. That's progress. A man can't let sentiment stand in the way of progress."

"I suppose you're right, Mr. Hughes. I suppose you're right."

Outside the window, beyond the slats of the open Venetian blinds, the intensity of the sunlight blazing down on the empty cars along the curb lessened with the shadow of a passing cloud. In the mirror, Billy's eyes shifted from the image of his own face to that of the window behind him.

It was at that precise moment, as the shadow of the cloud passed on down the street, that he saw him.

He was walking along the sidewalk on the opposite side, even with Murphy's Five and Ten. He looked about fourteen or fifteen years old, and he carried a fishing pole and a wicker basket.

Billy watched the boy in the mirror, his attention suddenly riveted to that silvered rectangle of glass. His lips had parted slightly, and a disturbing sensation of unreality washed over him.

The boy was clearly excited about something. He had been walking fast, in a great rush to get somewhere, but now he had stopped. He was looking up and down the street, searching for something.

He glanced in the direction of the barber shop.

Billy clenched his eyes shut, so tightly that spots danced against the insides of his lids. There was something wrong about this. Something terribly, terribly wrong.

He opened his eyes.

The boy was still there. To his horror, he was crossing the street, coming toward the door.

Al hadn't noticed him yet. Neither had old man Jeffers. Perhaps—perhaps he wasn't real.

The door opened, admitting a wave of heat. The boy stepped inside.

Al looked up from his work. "Afternoon, young fella. What can I do for you?"

Billy watched the boy's reflection.

He had shrunk down in the barber chair, and his heart was thumping wildly in his chest.

The boy was tanned, long-legged, and perspiring. He had apparently been running and was out of breath. His eyes were wide.

"Can you tell me where the police station is?"

Al straightened up, his scissors quiet.

"The police station? Just down the street, on the far side of the square. Now why would a nice young fella like you want to know that?"

The boy bit his lower lip, and lifted the wicker basket up to the counter top. The way it moved, you could tell something inside had rolled and bumped against it.

"I was fishing down under Indian Creek Bridge. My line got snagged on something. I pulled out this."

From his basket, he took out a human skull. It was wet, and green with a slimy coat of algae. The cranial cavity was filled with wet gray clay, giving it considerable weight.

For a moment, you could have heard a pin drop.

Al was the first to break the silence: "Goddamn, boy—I guess you do want the police, all right! You better get yourself on down there quick."

"Yeah. Thanks, mister."

The door opened and closed. The boy was gone.

Al glanced at old man Jeffers. "You ever seen that boy around before, Sam? I thought I knew all the kids in town."

Sam Jeffers scratched thoughtfully at his jaw. "Nope. Can't say as I have."

"Strange, finding somebody's skull like that. Probably the rest of him's down there in the mud. I wonder who it'll turn out to be?"

The old man cackled. "I sure as heck can't tell ya. Who do we know been missing?"

"Who do you suppose it might be, Mr. Hughes?"

Beneath the barber cloth, Billy's knuckles were white. He was gripping the arms of the chair so tightly that his fingernails bit into the leather.

"Mr. Hughes?"

In a blur of motion, Billy Hughes tore the drape from his collar and bolted for the door. It was standing open in his wake almost before the cloth had settled on the floor.

Al looked after him, his mouth hanging open.

"Now ain't that the damndest thing. Didn't even pay me! Forgot his jacket, too."

Old man Jeffers went to the window, spreading the blinds farther apart, just in time to see Billy Hughes disappear around the corner. He sat back down in his chair.

"Must not of been feeling too good. You see his face? White as

a sheet. Looked like he'd seen a ghost or something."

Dr. Benjamin Hayes, the Jefferson County coroner, reached up and flipped on the light above the examination table. Across the room, Tom Henderson, the ambulance driver, sat on the edge of a second table.

"What have we got here, Tom?"

"Fellow by the name of Billy Hughes, from over in Seymour. What's left of him, anyhow."

Dr. Hayes drew back the covering, then whistled softly.

"Shotgun?"

"Yep. Twelve gauge double barrel. You shoulda seen the bathroom ceiling, doc."

Dr. Hayes smiled wryly.

"Anybody else around when he did it?"

"His wife was downstairs. She called the sheriff right after she heard the shot. He told me the bathroom door was locked from the inside. He had to break it down."

"Anything else?"

"His wife said he'd been acting sort of peculiar for about a week."

Dr. Hayes shook his head. *Death as the result of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.* That's how the death certificate would read. The rest was better left to the imagination.

"I wouldn't see much reason for an autopsy if the law didn't require one." He glanced over at Tom Henderson. "Do you want to watch this?"

"Sure."

"There's a rubber apron in the locker. Better put it on."

"That's okay. I'll watch from over here."

Dr. Hayes smiled, his back to his young friend. He reached for a scalpel.

"Say, doc—I've been meaning to ask—whatever happened with that skull the kid fished out of Indian Creek last week?"

"We sent it downstate for a few tests. Just got back the results yesterday." He drew the knife quickly from the pubic bone to sternum. There was very little blood. "That old boy had been dead for a long time."

"Oh?"

"At least a couple of hundred years. They tell me it's the skull of an American Indian. Turns out there's an old Indian burial ground upstream a ways. Over the years, the creek has cut back into the bank. It washes out a few bones every now and then."

"Huh. Come to think of it, I do recall hearing stories about there being an old Indian graveyard out that way when I was a kid."

"You lived in Seymour?"

"For a while. That was about ten years ago. I guess I must have been about fourteen. My old man worked for the railroad then. We never did stay in one place for too long; just as soon as a stretch of track was done, we picked up and left."

He watched with interest as Dr. Hayes lifted the liver from the abdominal cavity and placed it on the tray of a hanging scale.

"Seymour came pretty close to being my last stop, though."

"How was that?"

"I was out late one night giggin' frogs—you know how kids are. Had me quite a mess of 'em, too. I was carryin' them home in a sort of wicker picnic basket. I was about halfway across that old iron bridge on the road into town when all of a sudden these headlights came rushing at me out of the fog. The driver must of been drunk. You should have heard the tires squeal!"

"Obviously you survived."

"Not by much. The damned fool hit me—well, he hit the basket I was carrying, anyway. It spun me clean over the rail and into the water. I was lucky I didn't drown."

"Did he stop?"

"That's the part it still scares me to think about, doc. He did stop. He got out of his car and looked over the edge into the water. It was too dark for him to see me down there, but I could see him real well in the beam of the headlights. He just stood there for a couple of minutes, listening. Then he picked up my fishing pole from where it had fallen on the road, and—real casual-like—he tossed it over the rail into the water."

Dr. Hayes's mouth was drawn into a hard, straight line.

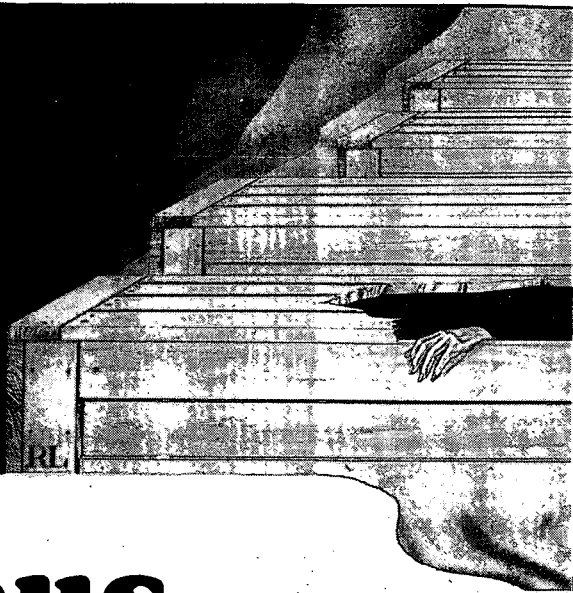
"You never told anyone what had happened?"

"Nope, I was too scared. Both of the guy on the bridge and of my old man. We were pulling out of town the next day, and I was supposed to be home in bed."

Dr. Hayes shook his head.

"It sure makes you wonder, doesn't it? That there are people like that running around, and nothing ever seems to happen to them."

"Yeah. If I ever see that fellow again, we'll have a little something to talk about. I'd know him if I saw him, too. I'll never forget that man's face, not if I live to be a hundred."



FICTION

Phebus

by Stephen Wasylyk

He sat dumbly on the edge of the bed, his hands hanging loosely between his fleshy thighs, his paunch sagging; a small man whose body resembled a beer keg, his sandy hair receding, his puffy facial skin drooping in sympathy with a pendulous right eyelid that gave him a perpetual leer.

The dingy bedroom was gloomy in the reflected glow

from the city lights in the street below, the woman's body on the floor almost hidden in the mid-night shadows at his feet. The small voice deep in the corridors of his mind that always instructed him and guided him spoke softly and menacingly, *"You shouldn't have done it, you fool!"*

He cringed inwardly, defending himself from the voice.

He had tried, in spite of the

Illustration by Ray Lago

other men, the drinking, the wasted money, the absences from the apartment for days at a time. *He had tried.* Sure, he had been angry and had thrown her out many times, but hadn't he always taken her back?

Shut up, he told the voice fiercely. It was over and done and there would be peace now. He had killed his wife and that ended everything. The voice stilled and left a vacuum that became filled with an exhilaration he had felt only a few times in the past when life had granted him something he had wished for desperately; a joy, an uplifting; a sense of invincibility and power and immeasurable personal worth.

From here on, he was a new man.

He rose from the bed and scooped up the half-empty bottle that had precipitated the quarrel. It wasn't until he lowered it and stood smiling that reality chilled him and fear froze him and the thought came: *What would they do to him?*

It had been an accident. Only an accident. But who would believe him? Everyone knew of the hard time she had given him the last few years. Dozens of people had heard them quarreling. How many would remember the times he'd threatened to kill her?

Now it was done, and he hadn't meant it at all, but if he

had been watching someone in his position, would *he* believe it had been only an accident?

His new-found feeling of freedom had fled, leaving behind an iciness in the pit of his stomach.

He wanted that freedom, had dreamed of it for years, but could never bring himself to leave her—just go away somewhere and leave her. No matter what she had become, he couldn't do that.

So he fought with her and stayed with her. And *she* wouldn't leave *him*. During the dozens of times he'd thrown her out, she'd always hung on the fringes of his life, knowing somehow he'd take her back again.

They were joined together by something beyond love: her dependence on him and his reluctant acceptance of that dependence, and only death could end that union.

Now it had. And all he wanted was to walk away from it all.

His eyes closed hard and tight, his face wrinkling with effort as he pondered his next step.

The voice came again, his friend once more, so sharp and clear that his eyes flicked around the room because he found it hard to believe it was inside his head.

"Get rid of the body," it said. *"No one will know if you get rid of the body."*

"How?" he whispered.

"Take it to work, fool."

He turned the words over in his mind, looking for the meaning. Sometimes the voice wasn't quite clear as to what it wanted him to do. Getting rid of a body wasn't easy.

The answer came, enunciated sharply and imperiously. The river.

She had been a small woman, naturally slender, and her excesses had so wasted her body that the remaining flesh was almost without substance and weight when he lifted her, draping one arm across his shoulder and holding the wrist tightly while he clamped his other arm around her waist.

After peering cautiously up and down the dimly lighted, deserted hallway, he started down the corridor toward the stairs. He had moved only a few feet when the metallic click of a latch plucked a quiver from his taut nerves. He whirled, and as the door of the apartment across from his opened, shuffled with his burden back toward his own.

A middle-aged man averted his face as he passed, as though he were too embarrassed to be seen, while the blonde young woman in the dressing gown who stood in the doorway folded her arms and stared at him and asked, "Trouble again, Phebus?"

Phebus smiled apologeti-

cally, his body shielding his wife from her. "Just bringing her home. I'll put her to bed and she'll be all right."

The woman shrugged and closed the door.

Phebus opened the door of his apartment, slammed it loudly, and with panic-intensified strength quickly carried the body down the stairs and out the rear entrance past the trash cans to his old car where he fumbled for the keys to the trunk.

Three minutes later, he drove into the street. His wet shirt clung and his muscles trembled from fatigue. Still, he felt satisfied.

He would not even be late for work.

The guard at the gate of the marine terminal waved the car to a halt and bent to peer through the window.

"I'm glad it's you, Phebus. Carstairs said not to let you in if you was late again, so watch yourself."

In the security office, the solid, stocky man with the close-cut hair straightened from leaning over an open file drawer and looked at him coldly. "Damned close to midnight. Good thing you're not late again. Get over to Warehouse Three and relieve Olaf."

A giant hand gripped Phe-

bus's stomach and squeezed painfully. "Not *Pier Three*?"

"If I wanted you on the pier, I'd have said so. They're clearing it out tonight because one of the ships that was due in this morning didn't get here until afternoon, so the chief has to pay overtime. He doesn't like that and when he doesn't like something he takes it out on me." Carstairs slammed a manila folder down on the desk. "Damned tubs. Never here when they're supposed to be. One five hours late, another already a day overdue." He jerked a thumb. "Move it, Phebus, and remember, I'll be around to check on you."

Phebus slipped into his uniform hurriedly, strapped a revolver to his waist, and pushed a flashlight into his hip pocket. Five minutes later, he parked at the side door of a long, low warehouse that pointed like a finger at a matching pier across a wide, cobblestoned street, serving as a storage depot for shipments awaiting their conigned destinations.

Three Pier and the freighter alongside were etched in bright light and shadow, the whirr of the winches and the shouts of the men loading the ship carrying in the still night.

Three Pier should have been dark. Three Pier should have been where Phebus spent the next eight hours, his car parked

alongside the shed, the trunk only six yards from the black river, so that any time during the silent morning hours, he could have weighted his wife's body and slipped it into the water and no one would have seen.

Now the river was several hundred yards away and unattainable because of the activity, and with trembling hands and despair tightening his throat, Phebus checked the lock on his trunk and entered the warehouse.

An elderly, heavy-set man at a desk inside the door pushed back his peaked hat and glared at him. "Where you been? You're late."

"Talking to Carstairs. You got anything to tell me?"

"Yeah, the radio is busted so it will be a long time until morning. You better punch in so the computer knows you're here."

Phebus pulled a small plastic card from his pocket and reluctantly inserted it into a slot in a small box on the wall. A red light on the face of the box glowed briefly before giving way to one of green.

He was now officially on duty. During the next eight hours, he would be required to insert his card on a strict schedule into small boxes at strategic locations throughout the warehouse building. While the

schedule was not rigorous, nowhere in it was there enough time to allow him to drive his car to one of the other piers, get rid of the body, and return without being late at his next station, and if that happened, he would be fired because Carstairs was looking for any excuse to let him go.

"I'm leaving," said Olaf.

"Yeah, you go."

"Listen," said Olaf, grinning. "I heard you was once a musician. Maybe you should have brought your clarinet. With the radio busted, you could make your own music."

"Be better than the junk you listen to," said Phebus coldly. He hitched up his gun belt and started his first round.

In forty minutes, he was back at the desk, an automaton who had completed his round without thinking of anything except the problem of the body in his trunk. He was no closer to a solution than when he had started, and for the first time, fear rather than worry tore at him. He had driven himself into a trap. While he had had no trouble bringing the body into the terminal, there was no way he could drive out with it. The car of every security man leaving was stopped at the gate and the trunk examined.

Several times during the next few hours, he stepped out of doors to check on the loading of

the freighter in the hope that it would be complete and the ship would depart. The distance from the warehouse to the water alongside Three Pier was only a few hundred yards. There was an outside chance he could make it between rounds.

If the ship left.

Which it obviously wasn't going to do.

Wrapped in his own problems, he generally paid little attention to when the ships came and went; huge hulks, some gleaming, others rusted, many with dull-sounding names, their destinations and ports of call of no interest to him—points down the river and over the horizon and beyond his limited world, their relationships to the ships and to each other obscure. The ships came and went—the cargo came and went. He was interested in neither, concentrating only on getting through eight hours without being fired and wondering what new difficulty awaited him at home.

The lights of Carstairs' jeep swung around the corner of the warehouse and he darted back through the door.

By four, he was making his rounds numbly, his nerves so tight his teeth were clamped into his lower lip, the pain welcome. The voice that had instructed him so clearly in the apartment had deserted him,

leaving him lost and alone, and he cursed the voice and his luck. Dropping the body into the river had seemed sensible at the time, but he could never have anticipated his shift in duty or the late loading of the freighter.

He finished his round and sat at his desk, his head in his hands. The silence of the warehouse weighed on him, broken only by the occasional toot of an early-rising tugboat, a lonesome protest that drove like a knife through his brain.

He hadn't wanted to kill her, he kept telling himself, but the words meant nothing. It would be difficult to explain and he saw no reason why he should be penalized because he had allowed years of control to slip for one moment.

"I just couldn't take it no more," he told the watch station on the wall.

The green light glowed at him sympathetically.

It wasn't fair. Other people did worse and escaped penalty.

He cursed again. He had never been lucky.

He pushed himself away from the desk and began his next round and it wasn't until he turned at the far end of the warehouse and looked back along the dimly lighted aisle between the stacked crates and boxes that the thought came that not all of the cargo in the

warehouse would be shipped the next day. Some of it would remain for another day or two or even three, waiting for a particular ship bound for a particular port. No one would look at it or examine the crates and boxes until the time came to load them aboard.

If he could hide her body in a box from one of those shipments, he could postpone the necessity of getting rid of it for twenty-four hours and drive out through the gate free and clear.

At the end of his round, he hurried back to the end of the warehouse and probed the groupings of cargo with his flashlight.

Warehouse Three was used for the storage of smaller shipments that for one reason or the other were impractical to send by air. Some of the shipments consisted of heavily loaded, strapped and banded skids, others were crated, still others boxed; some comprised only one or two pieces, others almost a truckload.

Phebus walked up and down the aisles, not knowing what he was looking for, trying to give substance to the vague idea in his mind. He passed a set of three long wooden boxes on a pallet, stopped and went back to them. Each was about six feet long and two feet square. One, dropped in transit, had a

corner slightly smashed, forcing the lid partially open.

He glanced around. Since the cargo in that area was grouped together relatively far back in the warehouse, it would probably not leave for several days.

After his next round, he hurried to the damaged box and used a pry bar to remove the lid. Nestled in a cradle inside was a long, black, rubber covered cylinder, geared at one end, a steel shaft projecting from the other. It was about fifteen inches in diameter and about five feet long.

Phebus didn't have the slightest idea what it was.

He pried the retaining blocks loose and tentatively hefted the cylinder. For its bulk it was surprisingly light, no more than sixty pounds or so. The tempo of his heart picked up.

He worked the cylinder out of the box and carried it to the other side of the warehouse, where he slipped it far back into the open space between two skids.

After his next round, he stepped outside. The ship was still in the dock, but some of the lights were out, most of the men gone. He stood for a few moments to be certain no one was looking in his direction in the softening, pre-dawn darkness before removing the body from the trunk and hurrying it inside.

He placed it in the box and nailed down the lid.

Tomorrow night, he thought. I'll put it in the river tomorrow night.

When he awoke, it was very late in the afternoon. He lay still for a few minutes, thinking of the night before, the iciness in his stomach replaced by a fierce, gnawing hunger, and he realized he hadn't had any food in almost thirty-six hours.

In the bathroom, he rubbed a hand over his stubbly beard before reaching for his razor. If he reported in like this, Carstairs would certainly fire him and one thing he didn't want was that. Sure, he could get by on unemployment for a time, but then what? Who would hire him when it was done?

Hands on his cheeks, he pulled the flesh down, examining his bloodshot eyes. *Strange*, he thought. *I don't look any different.* He released his cheeks, feeling foolish because he had expected some sort of mark, a brand, to be impressed into the skin.

When he stepped into the corridor, he met the young woman from the night before. She put out a hand to detain him.

"How is she?"

Phebus paused. "All right, I guess."

"All right? Don't you know?"

"No. I put her to bed and went to work. When I came home this morning, she was gone."

"She didn't look in good enough shape to go anywhere."

Phebus shrugged, unable to meet the woman's eyes. "Doesn't mean anything. She's done the same thing before."

"I could look around the neighborhood for her."

He shook his head. "She'll turn up. She always does."

"I'd like to help—"

He shook his head. "The time for help is long past."

He knew her eyes were fixed on his back as he walked down the hall. If she keeps asking questions, she'll cause trouble for me, he thought.

He drove up to the gate ten minutes early. The guard grinned at him.

"Second time in weeks. Carstairs getting through to you?"

"Sure," said Phebus. "As a reward, he's giving me patrol duty in the jeep."

When he walked into the security office, Carstairs nodded almost pleasantly.

"You go back to the warehouse."

Phebus almost grinned. "All right. Something loading at Three Pier?"

"No. I just need you to replace Olaf."

"I thought that maybe the ship that was late finally got here."

"Since when do you care when ships come and go?"

"Only asking." Phebus started into the locker room.

"Phebus."

He turned.

The tone was menacing. "I'll be by to talk to you later."

For a moment, worry lashed at him. Did Carstairs know something? He couldn't. If he did, he wouldn't have let him out of the office. It had to be Carstairs' way of keeping him in line.

He tried to keep from smiling as he drove to the warehouse, glancing at the empty dock alongside Three Pier with satisfaction. Even the threat of Carstairs' visit didn't bother him.

If things broke right, he could get the body, place it in his car and weight it, drive to the pier, drop it in the water, and return. How long could it take? He could work it all out between rounds. At two, three o'clock in the morning, the only one moving would be Carstairs and he could keep an eye out for him. It was a little risky, but at least he had a chance. He *had* to get rid of the body.

Olaf greeted him sourly. "You're late."

"Carstairs again."

"I guess he was asking you

about that fool roller."

Phebus's heart stuttered. "What roller?"

Olaf pointed. "That one."

Half hidden in the shadows, the cylinder Phebus had removed from the box lay against the wall.

He hooked his thumbs into his belt to keep his hands from trembling. "He didn't say anything to me."

"Yeah, well, he's really mad. Bad enough when a crate busts open and we're stuck with loose pieces. The trouble is, no one knows where this came from or what shipment it belongs to. No busted box around. So we'll have to hang on to it until someone complains." Olaf shook his head. "The thing that has Carstairs steamed is it looks like someone tried to hide it between two skids. Only reason it was found was because the shipment where it was hid went out today. Carstairs figures someone planned to rip it off later, but why? Nobody even knows what it is, so how much can it be worth?" Olaf headed for the door. "If he hasn't asked you yet, you can bet he'll be around. Don't worry. You'll hear him coming. The radio is still busted."

After Olaf had gone, Phebus stared at the roller. Of all the places he could have hidden it, he had to choose a shipment that went out today.

His luck again. Fear dried his mouth. He used his card and headed out on his round, irritated and tense because he had to check the front of the building first. He came down the broad aisle almost running, turned a corner, and stopped as though he had slammed into an invisible wall.

The area where he had left the box was clear.

He stood unable to move or think and then he began to run, his flashlight probing the shipments that remained, in the hope that the cargo had merely been shifted.

He sank to his knees on the cement floor, his flashlight beside him, his face buried in icy, trembling hands, needing no one to tell him that a freighter had arrived and departed during the day, the body of his wife now resting somewhere deep in its hold.

After a time, he rose to his feet and completed his round, walking woodenly as though his brain no longer controlled his limbs.

He was sitting, staring at nothing, when Carstairs walked in. Carstairs' eyes narrowed. "You sick?"

Phebus shook his head. "I'm all right."

"You better be. I don't have anyone to fill in for you. You sure you'll make the shift?"

"I said I'll be all right."

Carstairs pointed. "You know anything about that roller?"

"Olaf told me. I don't know anything."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. What difference does it make? Shipments have been lost before."

"I'll tell you what difference it makes. The difference is that something funny is going on, that's what difference it makes. Where did it come from? That's what I want to know. Should be an empty box somewhere."

"Maybe somebody took the box," said Phebus.

"Are you crazy? Who the hell would steal a box? And how would they get it out of here?"

"I dunno," said Phebus. "I don't know anything."

"Somebody does," said Carstairs. "Well, if it belonged with that stuff that went out today on the *Golden Dolphin*, we'll hear the screaming in about two weeks. The Islands aren't that far away."

The *Golden Dolphin*. So that's where his wife was now, thought Phebus. If Carstairs was looking for screaming, he'd get plenty of it when they opened that box. He gritted his teeth, wanting to yell at Carstairs to go, to leave him alone. "It should have shown up on the paper work."

"All of that checked out."

"I don't know anything," repeated Phebus.

"All right. Just remember, I'll be looking around anyway."

Phebus walked to the door and watched him drive away. A cold rain had started, parallel sheets that marched in orderly rows until swirled by gusts of wind. Back inside the warehouse, Phebus could hear it drumming mournfully on the roof. He felt that somehow it had penetrated his soul, leaving him chilled inside and incapable of any emotion.

He finished his shift and went home to lie awake, hands clasped behind his head, staring at the ceiling. The rain continued, cold and hard, washing at the windows.

The body probably wouldn't be discovered before the *Golden Dolphin* made port, but would certainly be found shortly afterward. It would be simple to trace back and identify the woman and it would be equally simple to determine that he had been responsible.

Eventually they would come and get him.

When the knock on the apartment door came that afternoon, he thought the moment had come. The two men in the hall were obviously detectives. Phebus didn't even glance at the badge one of them held up.

"I'm Rafsky," said the tall, thin one. "This is Sullivan. We're

just checking something out, Mr. Phebus." His voice became apologetic. "You understand we have to look into things when someone asks us to do it."

Phebus said nothing, his mouth dry.

"The woman across the hall says your wife has disappeared. She says she's looked all over the neighborhood and no one has seen her for a couple of days."

Phebus wet his lips. "My wife—"

"Listen, Mr. Phebus," said Rafsky gently. "We know the kind of woman your wife is. We're sure she just went off with someone and will come back. What we'd like you to do is tell us when she does that so we can close the record. Okay?"

Phebus nodded.

Sullivan, a square-faced man with glacial eyes and a thick neck, wandered around the room, touching things as though he had to be sure they existed, those eyes missing nothing.

"We won't bother you any longer," said Rafsky. "We'll just ask around the neighborhood a bit more to satisfy the captain." He patted Phebus's shoulder. "My cousin had the same problem, so I know how you feel."

After they had gone, Phebus sat on the edge of the bed.

It was all out of his hands now, gone when they had loaded that box aboard the ship.

Damn.

Why couldn't things ever work out right for him? It would have been such a simple thing if her body had been found in the river. The way she lived, nothing would have been thought of it, and no one would have been hurt.

Now all he could do was sit and wait.

Or run.

To where?

And even if he had someplace to go, what would he use for money? All he had was next week's pay check. She had spent everything else.

He went to work that night because he knew of nothing else to do, driving automatically, so resigned he wasn't even aware of the wind-driven rain that still pounded at the city.

Carstairs was not in the office. Phebus changed and looked up at the assignment board. He was to relieve Olaf again.

He drove mechanically to the warehouse. Here, with nothing to break the sweep of the wind across the wide river, the rain pelted him with a whispering, stinging fury he neither heard nor felt.

"Listen," said Olaf. "I bought a new radio. Cost \$29.95. You want to split it when you get paid?"

Phebus nodded dumbly, staring at the cylinder still lying against the wall, the rubber

dark, the metal gleaming; and for a second, the cylinder disappeared and was replaced by his wife's body. He brushed at his eyes. The apparition disappeared, yet he retained the feeling that somehow she was near.

"You feel all right?" asked Olaf.

Phebus nodded.

Olaf slipped into a shiny black slicker. "This rain is something, isn't it? At least the wife will have a good meal ready. She's thoughtful that way."

When he left, the wind caught the door and slammed it wide and the cold and the dampness invaded the dusty dryness of the warehouse and Phebus shivered.

Several times during the night, he sat at the desk and drew his revolver, placing it before him and staring at it. It was during one of those times when the hourly news broadcast came through on Olaf's new radio that he heard a familiar name and half-turned to listen.

"—the Coast Guard reports that the Golden Dolphin has gone down in heavy seas off the coast after being broken in two by the storm. She had been abandoned earlier by the crew, and only one casualty was reported."

Phebus sat stunned, the words freezing him to his chair. The voice within him, returned,

chuckling in deep satisfaction.

He was rid of her at last. She would never be found and there was nothing to link him to her disappearance.

He couldn't believe his good luck.

Happiness rose within him slowly, like the dawn lightening the sky outside.

Nothing to worry about.

He was finally free.

He made his rounds with light footsteps, a small smile on his face.

He was standing at the open door, breathing deep of the cool air of dawn when Carstairs' jeep came down the street. He ducked back inside.

The jeep stopped by the door and Carstairs came in, followed by Rafsky and Sullivan.

"I knew damned well you'd been up to something," said Carstairs, "but I didn't think you had the guts to kill your wife."

"Take it easy," said Rafsky.

Sullivan stood before him, those glacial eyes accusing.

"We found blood on the floor of your apartment," he said.

"The woman across the hall said she saw you carrying your wife and we found a neighbor who told us he saw you place something in the trunk of your car. You killed her, didn't you, Mr. Phebus?"

"No," said Phebus.

"We're sure you did," said

Sullivan. "What we don't know is what you did with the body. If you had dumped it between your apartment and here that morning, it would have turned up by now, and Carstairs here tells us if you had it with you when you came, there was no way you could have left with it. So it has to be here somewhere."

"Here?" asked Phebus. "Where could it be here?" He indicated Carstairs. "Ask him. Go ahead. Ask him if there is anywhere it could be here. You people are crazy."

"The river isn't far away," said Rafsky.

"Sure," said Phebus. "The river. Like I have all the time in the world to go to the river and drop a body in, like there would be no one to see me if I did." He pointed at Carstairs. "You tell them. Go ahead. Tell them if I have time between rounds to go to the river. Tell them if I missed a station the last two nights. The only thing left this warehouse the last couple of days was what was supposed to leave it."

"Except that," Carstairs pointed at the roller.

Sullivan rolled it slightly with his toe. "What is it?"

"No one knows," said Carstairs. "We found it tucked away between two skids the other night. Had to come in here in some sort of box; but we didn't

find any that were broken or empty."

Phebus felt a coldness inside.

"Look at it," said Sullivan.

"About five feet long and about fifteen, eighteen inches across."

His eyes found Phebus. "Your wife was a small woman, wasn't she?"

"Wait a minute!" snapped Carstairs. "You saying he took this thing out of the box it came in and put his wife's body inside?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Damn. I never thought about anything like that, but then I didn't know he had something to hide."

"Do you remember seeing a box this roller might fit?"

"Sure. Three of them. All nailed shut and looking like they hadn't been touched."

"Where are they now?"

Phebus nearly laughed.

"On the pier," said Carstairs.

The words went by so quickly, their meaning was almost lost on Phebus. He had to pursue them with his mind and bring them back and examine them before the horror struck home.

"No!" he screamed. "You said—"

"I said what?"

The words were a wail. "All that stuff went out on the *Golden Dolphin*!"

Carstairs stared at him for a moment before smiling pity-

ingly. "You poor dummy. You never even noticed what you did when you stuffed her body into that box, never even gave a thought as to where that box was going. I guess you didn't give a damn. All you wanted to do was get rid of it."

Phebus wanted to protest. He didn't intend the body to be shipped. All he wanted to do was conceal it for twenty-four hours. What kind of a man did Carstairs think he was?

"What did he do?" asked Sullivan.

"He hid it in a box destined for Copenhagen," said Carstairs.

"As good a place as any," said Rafsky.

"I guess it is," said Carstairs, "but that isn't the joke." He began to laugh, the sound loud in the stillness.

"What's so funny?" asked Sullivan.

"You have to know what a loser he is to appreciate it," gasped Carstairs. "Because that area had been cleared, he thought the box had been shipped out on a rusty tub called the *Golden Dolphin* that was just reported sunk by the storm. Can you imagine how happy he was to hear that? The body was gone, and without a body, you two wouldn't have much of a case. But if he had bothered to

look at what he was doing, he'd have known only part of that cargo was destined for the Islands, and that there was no way in the world that something slated for Copenhagen would be on board."

"But you moved it!" yelled Phebus. He lunged at Carstairs. Sullivan and Rafsky caught his arms. "Why did you move it?"

"To save time when the ship that's already three days late because of engine trouble finally gets here. The boss wants it aboard the minute she ties up, so we shifted it into the pier shed."

Phebus stood still. There was no point to all of this. There had been no point to it from the beginning. Copenhagen. The Islands. Ships in. Ships out. Caring where cargo was going or wasn't going. None of it made any difference.

She had been across the street all the time. That was the way she always behaved when he threw her out. Hang around. Stay close. No matter how harsh he was, she never went far away. Now, even though he'd killed her, she refused to leave him. He just couldn't get rid of her.

What made him start screaming was that he knew he never would.

CASES ON FILE

The Missing Romanov Tomb by Robert L. Plumb



On the small Zayachy Island in the center of the Neva River in Leningrad stands the forbidding Peter and Paul Fortress. It was the first building Peter the Great erected in St. Petersburg; his new capital for Russia, named in honor of his patron saint. Within the dimly lighted alcoves of the cathedral inside the fortress is the beautiful white marble sarcophagus of Peter the Great and his wife, Empress Catherine I. Nearby, neatly arranged in row after row of white marble boxes, stand the tombs of the subsequent

Romanov rulers of Russia. There are few exceptions. There is no coffin for the last Romanov, Emperor Nicholas II, whose final resting place is in an unmarked grave in western Siberia, where he was executed by the Bolsheviks in 1918. And there is no tomb for Ivan VI, a little known and less remembered emperor of the eighteenth century.

Ivan VI was one of six rather nondescript rulers in the thirty-seven-year period between the death of Peter the Great in 1725 and the accession of Catherine the Great in 1762. Three of

Above, Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia when her mysterious predecessor, Ivan VI, died.

these six interim rulers were female, and three were male. Two of the women were incompetent; the other, the Empress Elizabeth, is perhaps best remembered for her wardrobe which, at the time of her death, consisted of fifteen thousand gowns. The three male sovereigns of this period were little improvement over their female counterparts: one was a boy, one was a childish adult, and the third was a mere baby who was proclaimed emperor in 1740 when he was but two months old. This infant was Ivan VI.

For nearly four decades after the death of Peter the Great, the crown passed back and forth between the heirs of Peter and those of his half brother, Ivan V. The latter's descendants relied heavily upon foreign advisors and brought the hated rule of the Germans to Russia. Young Ivan VI's mother was Princess Anne of Mecklenburg, and his father was Prince Anthony Ulrich of Brunswick. Princess Anne, a granddaughter of Ivan V, served as regent for her infant son; and during her regency, the chief advisors were Germans and key military appointments were given to young German officers. It was therefore not surprising that only fourteen months after his accession the Russian nobility rose up against their baby em-

peror and his German parents in a bloodless coup that placed Elizabeth, the youngest daughter of Peter the Great, on the throne at St. Petersburg in early December, 1741.

The one-year-old Ivan, his mother and father, and his newly-born baby sister were arrested and sent to the Schlüsselburg Fortress at nearby Lake Ladoga until the Empress Elizabeth could decide what to do with them. After three days of deliberation, she announced that she was sending the family, with a royal escort, back to Brunswick, the home of Ivan's father.

By late December, 1741, the hapless family had reached Riga and were just miles from Poland and their freedom, but Elizabeth had a change of heart. She ordered the prisoners detained there indefinitely under the custody of Field Marshal Peter Lacy, the governor general of Riga. This temporary delay was continued month after month throughout 1742. After several clumsy attempts to escape from their confinement with the aid of their German followers, the family of four was removed from palace arrest and was put in the Dunamünde Fortress for safekeeping in December, 1742. The family remained in confinement there throughout the next year; during that

time another daughter was born.

In 1744, fearful of the consequences of Ivan's leaving Russia, Elizabeth ordered the family separated from their friends and retainers in Riga and returned to the interior of Russia. They were sent north to the small village of Khomogory fifty miles from Archangel, where their stay was anything but pleasant. They were kept in one large room of an old frame house; the guards and the officer in charge occupied the remainder of the building. The family grew in size from five to seven when Ivan's mother gave birth to two more sons in successive years; Princess Anne died in 1746, however, shortly after the birth of her fifth child. Ivan was six years old at the time of his mother's death.

Young Ivan spent the next ten years with his father, his two brothers, and his two sisters in these dismal, frigid surroundings. His only education consisted of what his father, Prince Anthony Ulrich, could teach him, plus some occasional instruction from a sympathetic officer of the guard. In the winter of 1756, when he was sixteen years old, he was removed from his family, never to see them again, and by the order of Empress Elizabeth was taken to St. Petersburg in a tightly

curtained carriage. He was placed under house arrest and was secretly visited by the empress on at least two occasions, partly because she was curious about her unfortunate cousin, whom she had last seen in his crib on the night of her coup fifteen years earlier, and partly because she wanted to determine whether this youth, described as tall and fair complexioned, could be named as her successor. Nothing came of these visits, however, and Elizabeth ordered Ivan returned to the Schlüsselburg Fortress where he and his family had initially been imprisoned. At Schlüsselburg, the teenaged former emperor was virtually buried alive in a subterranean cell. He saw no light but that from an oil lamp, and he came to know no difference between day and night for the next six years.

Shortly after Ivan's twenty-first birthday, the Empress Elizabeth died suddenly, and the crown passed in January, 1762, to her weakminded nephew, Peter III, also a cousin of Ivan. Peter, a German by birth and preference, proved to be the only friend poor Ivan ever had. Peter visited him at his prison, took him gifts, and had him moved to better quarters. Later, Peter ordered Ivan returned to the capital and

housed, though still under guard, in a private dwelling where the two "German" emperors visited frequently. Whatever the purpose of this humane treatment, it terminated almost as quickly as it had begun when in July, 1762, the semi-mad Peter was ousted by a palace revolt of the Russian guards regiments. They proclaimed his wife Catherine their new empress and murdered Peter within days, leaving Ivan alone and friendless once again.

The fate of the twenty-two-year-old ex-sovereign now rested in the hands of Catherine II, subsequently known as Catherine the Great (a title certainly not acquired from her treatment of Ivan). One of her first acts as empress was to have him returned to the Schlusselfburg Fortress. She directed that he be incarcerated in a larger subterranean dungeon and be well treated, clothed, and fed. At the same time, however, she also ordered two officers permanently stationed in an anteroom to his cell, with standing orders never to release Ivan without a warrant bearing her signature and to kill him, if necessary, to prevent his escaping.

Like her two predecessors on the throne, Catherine also found Ivan to be something of a cur-

iosity, and she visited him at least once in his dungeon. She later recalled in her *Memoirs* that he stuttered, was weak-minded, and made wild statements to the effect that he was not the person he passed for.

Ivan lingered in his new cell for another two years, at which time he was twenty-four years old and had spent all but the first year of his life under arrest. In the summer of 1764, one Lieutenant Vassily Mirovich, seeking to regain the fame and fortune his impoverished family had once possessed, devised a wild scheme to rescue Ivan from imprisonment, proclaim him the rightful emperor, and oust Catherine from the throne. To do this, Mirovich had himself assigned to guard duty in the Schlusselfburg Fortress, where he won over several non-commissioned officers to his plan. Together they persuaded about fifty privates on duty in the fortress to join them, and on the evening of July 15, 1764, they fought their way past loyal guards to Ivan's cell. The two officers on duty inside the chamber, however, learning of the would-be rescue, had already carried out their grisly orders, and Lieutenant Mirovich found only Ivan's lifeless, bleeding body covered with knife and bayonet wounds. The grief-stricken Mirovich and his ac-

complices were seized by reinforcements rushed to the scene, and he was subsequently tried and executed for his ill-fated plot.

After Ivan's murder, his body was dressed in the uniform of a sailor and "lay in state" in the small wooden chapel inside the Schlussemburg compound for several days. It was reported that immense crowds of the curious came from as far away as the capital to view the tragic prince's mortal remains. The corpse they saw was that of a man about six feet tall, of athletic build. He was fair complexioned and had reddish hair and a pointed red beard. Finally Ivan's body was secretly removed one night and was buried not in the royal sanctuary but without ceremony in the nearby Tichrin Monastery. Thus even in death, as throughout his short unhappy life, Catherine denied Ivan the regal recognition due him. She was usually a very compassionate woman in such circumstances: it was almost as if she knew something she could not reveal.

And, indeed, perhaps she did; because almost two hundred years after the death of Ivan VI, a startling secret was made known by the Heusinger family of Kiel, Germany, when they released four yellowed documents that had belonged to an

eighteenth century relative, Heronimus Werner Heusinger.

Heusinger had lived in Brunswick from 1714 to 1796. The first of these aged papers was his commission as a lieutenant in the Russian army, issued on June 10, 1741, at the time Ivan VI was the infant emperor of Russia.

The second document was Heusinger's brief, five-page autobiography. From it, we learn that he was the son of a Lutheran minister; that he served as a Brunswick officer under Prince Anthony Ulrich, Ivan's father, in the 1737 Turkish campaigns before Ivan's birth; and that he joined the Russian army in 1741 and left it in 1742 after the overthrow of Ivan and his parents. Heusinger returned to Brunswick in 1743, received a large sum of money from the state treasury, and was appointed commissioner of war by the Duke of Brunswick in 1744. He married twice, the first time to a widow with five children from her previous marriage, and during his two marriages, he fathered twenty children of his own.

The third document was a small prayer book that Lieutenant Heusinger carried with him throughout his tour of military service with the Russian army in 1741 and 1742. He ap-

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parently used it as a sort of diary by making occasional scattered entries with the dates and locales of his assignments. Interestingly, his notations are beside various verses he underlined, such as the one he marked at the time of receiving his Russian army commission in June, 1741: "I leave you not alone; bless me then. . . . See I am with you and will watch over you wherever you are." In late December, 1741, after Ivan's arrest, he wrote: "Fell into great sorrow. I was in Periaslav on duty. To the gentleman who gave me a new life be honor and reward in eternity. I have failed the first time. . . . God has given me a future to which he directs my body and soul." The next entry, dated January, 1743, stands beside the underlined psalm which reads, "For God hears the needy and scorns not his prisoners." The next to last entry in Heusinger's prayer book is dated August, 1743, in Brunswick and stands beside the printed words, "Can also a woman forget her little ones, so that she is not moved to pity over the son of her body? And, if she forgets this same, will I not forget you? See in my hands I have preserved you."

The final piece of paper leaves no doubt as to the meaning of the entries and underlinings in Heusinger's combination prayer

book and diary. It is a large single sheet of eighteenth century Japanese lined paper; it is dated December 23, 1742, in Riga; and it is signed by five prominent officials with their wax seals. The major signature on the paper is that of Count Peter Lacy, Field Marshal and Governor General of Riga, the man whom Elizabeth had entrusted with the safekeeping of Ivan and his parents during their detention in that city. The document is a declaration that the undersigned had permitted Heusinger, upon his release from the Russian army, to kidnap young Ivan from the Dunamunde Fortress and to substitute in his place the two-year-old son of a Swedish prisoner of war. The rescue was permitted because of the innocent prince's plight, and in recognition that Ivan was the rightful Russian ruler. The paper went on to state that Heusinger had taken a precious oath not to reveal this deed for at least twenty-six years. Should he do so prior to that time, he would be revealed as a rogue and scoundrel, and every authority would be requested to treat him as such and punish him accordingly.

It is obvious that Heusinger honored his sacred oath to the fullest, and the secret, which must have been regarded as too

dangerous to divulge anyway, was kept within his family for many subsequent generations.

What is not made known by these remarkable documents is what happened to the real Ivan after his return to Brunswick. It is possible that Heusinger returned the boy to Prince Anthony Ulrich's family; this does not seem likely, however, since there was no addition made to the royal Brunswick register at that time. It is more probable that Ivan was adopted into the Heusinger family where he could easily have become one of Heusinger's acknowledged twenty-five real and step children. Accordingly, Ivan probably grew up in complete

ignorance of his true identity among his many adopted brothers and sisters.

The Heusinger papers may also tend to explain at long last why Catherine the Great did not inter Ivan VI's body in the Romanov mausoleum in St. Petersburg. Perhaps she had her doubts about Ivan's authenticity after her meeting with him in his dungeon. Perhaps she had even learned the secret about the prisoner in Schlüsselburg and could not bring herself to permit the burial of an impostor in the royal crypt. If so, the mystery of the missing marble tomb of Ivan VI in the Peter and Paul Fortress has been solved.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Photograph by Berenice Abbott, Federal Arts Project,
"Changing New York", Museum of the City of New York.*

An old house, a lonely little statue in the long grass . . . what might their story be? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

THE STORY THAT WON



The prize for the September Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Jerry Hackady of Sarasota, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Bernice Holt, of Montgomery, Alabama; Constance L. Carcia, of Hartford, Connecticut; Keith Schulenberg, of Fairview Park, Ohio; and James Aiello, of Sea Cliff, New York.

TIME'S WINGED CHARIOT

by Jerry Hackady

She could see the coach now, waiting for her behind a sentinel of trees. The sight of it made her double her efforts, and she began to run faster. She paused to look back. He was still in pursuit. The evening breeze billowed his cloak, giving him the appearance of some diabolical winged creature that had marked her as its prey. The coach, as she ran toward it, seemed to take on an eerie cast, almost ominous—a collage of shadowy bits and pieces, disjointed abstract shapes shimmering on the evening mist.

The driver stood, one hand on the open door, the other frantically beckoning her to enter. "Step lively, miss," he called. "Quickly now. You're in grave danger."

"Oh, hurry, please hurry," she pleaded and hastened into the coach. The cracking of a whip punctuated the silence, and the coach moved onto the cobblestone driveway, nearly overturning as it careened around a sharp bend in the road in a relentless effort to make up for lost time.

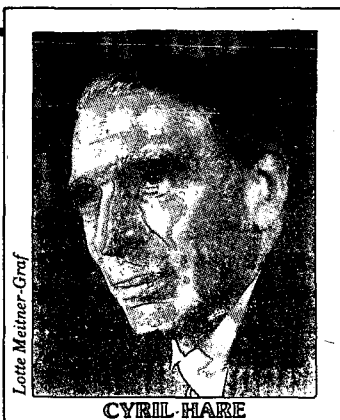
She knew now that she was powerless to ward off what was about to happen. "Faster, faster!" she shouted to the driver.

A brilliant flash of light forced her to close her eyes. She felt weightless, as if imprisoned in some timelock, a kind of limbo between fantasy and reality. She was falling. When she opened her eyes, the vibrations of the town clock still rang in her ears.

Hugging the large pumpkin resting in her lap, Cinderella began to weep.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by *Mary Cannon*



A friend and I were frittering away an idle hour recently, and the subject turned—as it often does when one is frittering—to films. It developed that neither of us had seen a single of the recent batch of horror movies. I pleaded a weak stomach for grisly gore, and admitted to many seasons of self-enforced deprivation. My friend stoutly claimed to have loved them as a child; in fact, she seemed surprised to realize that she'd outgrown them. "You know," she confided, "when I was a kid I loved being scared. It was all so obviously make-believe. Now," she added ruefully, "I'm older, and I know more of man's potential cruelty

to other men. It's not the fiction that I once thought it was. And I guess," she added, "it just isn't fun any more." There was a lull, and one of us quickly changed the subject. Perhaps Manhattan residents are more sensitive than most to random thoughts of everyday violence and rampant psychopaths.

That conversation stuck with me, though, and its implications have been rattling around like loose marbles in my brain. I've always enjoyed mystery/suspense/thriller novels. I was always one step behind Nancy Drew when she decided to explore the attic of an abandoned house (for the fiftieth time!), and I knew she was

going to find something guaranteed to be scary. But gratuitous violence is something else. Don't misunderstand me. I revel in swift-paced thrillers; I boldly plunge into the murkiest moral depths of Cold War espionage tales. I merely pass over the slick and sleazy, when sadism is used to compensate for ingenuity.

These same preferences explain the attraction of the classic mystery tales of the first half of the twentieth century for many of us. Written for readers who weren't accustomed to seeking their entertainments in chain-saw massacre films, writers of the ilk of Edmund Crispin, E. C. Bentley, and Margery Allingham (whom I've profiled in recent columns) embellished their mysteries with wit, fresh settings, colorful characters, and clever plots. Sometimes they even seasoned the stories with satire. If you've dipped into these writers yourself—and enjoyed your dips—then you'll also want to read Cyril Hare's books.

Cyril Hare, whose real name was Alfred Alexander Gordon Clark, was an English jurist who, luckily for us, turned his hand to mystery writing in 1937. *Tenant for Death* introduced Inspector Mallett from Scotland Yard, described as "the beefy man with the nimble brain," and Mallett continued to make

appearances in later books. But Hare's series protagonist, Francis Pettigrew, doesn't show up until *Tragedy at Law*, a delightfully complex British mystery that follows the route taken by a circuit court judge whose life has been threatened. Pettigrew is a not very prosperous lawyer whose cases have taken him along the same trail, and aside from a rather wicked, low-key wit (the primary reason his career has never flourished), he's pretty unassuming. Actually, he's one of Mallett's prime suspects, for Pettigrew once courted the judge's beautiful wife Hilda. Further, he has the misfortune to be often at the wrong place at the right time, and he makes no pretense of liking the supercilious judge. The fun in this book is watching Pettigrew develop, and the insider's view of British jurisprudence at work.

Pettigrew's somewhat lonely bachelor existence is considerably brightened when he falls in love with Eleanor, his young secretary in *With a Bare Bodkin*. This is, however, the very end of a novel set in wartime rural England, where Pettigrew has gone to work for The Pin Control. (I kid you not, and who are we to diminish Pettigrew's war effort?) Hare weaves a number of threads—the leaking of trade secrets, the group's collaborative attempt to write a mystery story (known in the

"dorm" as *The Plot*), and a number of closely-kept secrets from the past—into a ripper of a murder story.

The settings change with each book. In *Death Walks the Woods*, Pettigrew and Eleanor are retired to a country cottage when he is finally asked to do duty as a deputy circuit court judge—and a quiet and religious neighbor is murdered in the neighboring woods. In *Untimely Death*, he teams up again with his old friend John Mallett, who has by now also retired. It is the sympathetic Eleanor who has drafted the aid of Mallett, for Pettigrew is beginning to worry about senility. And who wouldn't? He's on vacation, walking a path he often took as a boy summering with relatives; he's hoping to exorcise a horrible experience—the discovery of a dead body on the moor. It's the worst kind of *déjà vu* when it happens again, especially when the body seems to disappear almost immediately afterwards.

I cannot neglect to mention two other Hare titles, both of which are also considered classics of their kind. *Death Is No Sportsman* includes a map

(which gives you a hint of what's to come) and hinges on Mallett's breaking down a number of alibis and carefully constructing a timetable of the crime. *An English Murder* is even more conventional: a gathering of mismatched people who make a houseparty at Christmastime at the request of a dying and wealthy lord; a murder that takes place in front of everyone's eyes; a blizzard that traps them all, with a poor Scotland Yard bodyguard (there to protect a guest) to take charge of the case; and more violence to come.

None of these novels will keep you up reading. But if you've been feeling frayed and fearful from watching the TV news—and, if in fact, *falling asleep* at night is a greater problem!—then slip back into rural England of the 1940's. It won't be anything like real life in the 1980's. . . . Need I say more?

(Cyril Hare's mysteries are published by Harper in their Harper Perennial paperback editions at \$2.50, with the exception of *Tenant for Death*, which Dover publishes in paperback at \$3.50.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

An archaic code phrase hidden in an apparently innocent memoir plunges a weary young publisher and his reporter-girlfriend into the heart of a nightmare with the code name "Zodiac." As the

protagonist unearths the details of the plot—a rather conventional political conspiracy of men in very high places—he finds himself pursued in a deadly (almost book-length!) chase. Meanwhile, a quiet, dying ex-agent known as “Chameleon” begins work on his own plan to foil Zodiac. Author Tom Hyman moves **The Giant Killer** along at a swift pace, and one finds little time to question the plausibility of the plot. There are also some new elements: a private wild game park in the South, reserved as a playground for wealthy politicians, turns into the scene of a bloody and primitive manhunt that pits our hero against the sadistic “Cyclops,” and there’s a chilling sequence built around sky-diving. (Bantam Books, \$3.50, 320 pp.)

In **The Skull Beneath the Skin** P.D. James brings back young Cordelia Gray, the English private investigator in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. Cordelia has been keeping starvation at bay by locating lost pets, so the job of protecting actress Clarissa Lisle for a weekend performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* at a lonely Dorset island mansion seems a nice change of pace. The least horrifying part of the weekend is the discovery that Clarissa has been murdered, the fulfillment of the promise in the threatening letters she’d been receiving for months. James nicely balances the complex and very contemporary Cordelia, a sensible and unromantic young woman, with a large helping of Gothic trimmings. There’s the bloodthirsty drama performance, a sea-lashed castle cut off by a storm, a number of enemies disguised as old friends and relatives of the actress, and a grim family crypt that was the scene in World War II of a cruelty that could vie with any in a Jacobean melodrama. Cordelia must draw upon great lodes of courage, stamina, and ingenuity just to survive her weekend in the country, and it won’t take you nearly that long to get to the final page. (Scribner’s, \$13.95, 328 pp.)

Julian Symons, named 1982’s Grand Master by the MWA, has written an offbeat period mystery titled **The Detling Secret**. Set in Victorian England, it initially appears to be a look at middle-class domestic life in London. Under the surface, however, there are ever-growing ripples of financial fraud, Irish terrorism—and finally, murder. This is something different, and skillfully done. (Viking Press, \$14.75, 224 pp.)

Anne Morice’s **Hollow Vengeance** stars Tessa Crichton, British actress and wife of a London C.I.D. man. He’s in the city most of the time, though, while the action’s in a close-knit rural community where Tessa is visiting an old friend. An crotchety, rich widow and

newcomer to the neighborhood is making everyone's life miserable, and the community is fit to kill—which one of them does. I guessed the ending, which is a bad sign. But maybe all of us get lucky on occasion. (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95, 173 pp.)

In **The Earhart Mission** Peter Tanous has written an intriguing thriller based on the premise that famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart didn't die in a plane crash in 1937. Rather, she was forced down in the Pacific and lost her memory, taking with her the knowledge she had gained during her flight, part of a U.S. intelligence mission to locate half a million dollars in gold that sank with the *Sherman*. (The gold was part of a secret U.S. loan to China, to help them fight the Japanese. Apparently this is also a popular historical hypothesis.) Anyway, when an old lady in Australia, while undergoing hypnotic treatment for pain, claims to be Amelia Earhart, several groups mobilize for the treasure hunt: a U.S. career colonel, a greedy survivor from the *Sherman*, an ambitious newspaper reporter—and the ever-present hostile foreign power. (Bantam Books, \$2.75, 224 pp.)

Several recent thrillers have tried to give us an insider's view of Russia. **The Confucius Enigma** attempts to do the same for China, and I imagine this is a fairly accurate view of Peking from a Westerner's vantage point. Author Margaret Jones is a Sydney journalist who worked there for two years in the mid-1970's, and many events in her novel are purportedly true; more authenticity is added by the inclusion of real "Documents of the Case." The case referred to is that of a British journalist named Alan and his spunky lover, an Australian doctor named Jo, who find themselves enmeshed in a plot to smuggle out a pro-Western Chinese politico who's widely believed to be dead. There's lots of paranoia and politics, details on how foreigners spend the dry and dusty days in Peking, and a suitable Chinese puzzle of a plot to ensnare the protagonists. (St. Martin's Press, \$10.95, 257 pp.)

Dover has recently reissued in sturdy paperback format **The Red Redmaynes** by Eden Philpotts (best known for inspiring the young Agatha Christie to write). Originally published in 1922, this is a vintage period British mystery, dripping with atmosphere (Dartmoor is one of the locales), proper post-Victorian sentiment, an eccentric and cerebral detective (noteworthy because, in this instance, he is a visiting American rather than the other way around), and a series of devilish murders that can only have been committed by Evil Incarnate. If you enjoy Wilkie Collins, you'll like *The Red Redmaynes*. (\$5.50, 377 pp.)

FICTION

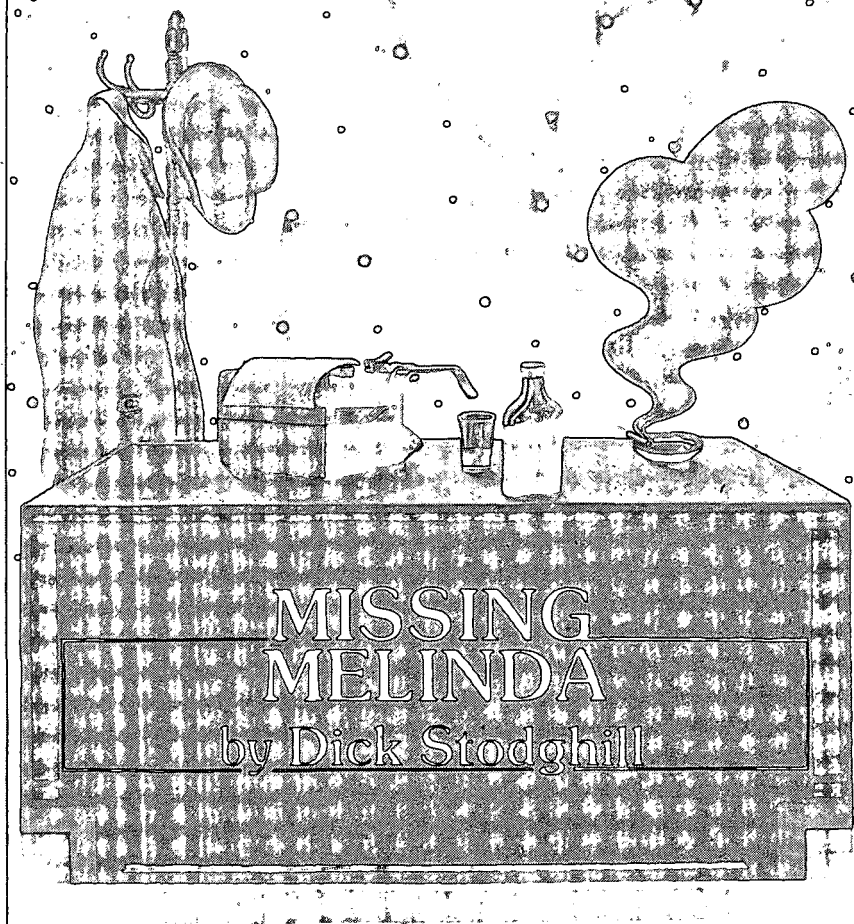


Illustration by Mark F'resh

Something is bothering Driscoll. It amuses me for a moment or two, watching him gnaw his lower lip while his brows arch, then curl in a frown, then arch again. He is so transparent and so unaware of it. No wonder he always loses at poker but can never understand why.

We sit at a round table in the back room of Horner's Tavern, alone with the soothing sound of Tommy Dorsey's "Marie." It occurs to me that on a July evening forty years after the era of the big bands, the jukebox at Horner's may be the only one offering its music exclusively. Criticize it within Jack Horner's hearing and you will find yourself out on the street.

Eventually I grow tired of Driscoll's facial gyrations and say, "What is it this time, Grady, a jealous husband or another bill collector?"

My third-beer humor annoys him. He turns his round Irish face toward me and opens his mouth, then snaps it shut again in the way a frog might catch a fly. I grin and that adds to his annoyance.

"Have to make a joke of everything, don't you?" he says. "Trouble with you, Blinn, you get your kicks out of other people's problems, then can't wait to use them in that column of yours so everybody in town can have a good laugh."

I go on grinning, aware that both of us know "Around Town with Hal Blinn" has never been that kind of column. Even if I wanted it that way, a writer using such an approach wouldn't last a month in an Indiana town of eighty thousand. A Hoosier enjoys gossip as much as the next person, but not when it hits too close to home and appears in print. Passing it from mouth to mouth is something else again.

As usual, Driscoll's anger cools as quickly as it heated. He brushes a hand over the few sandy hairs remaining on top of his head and says, "Dammit, Hal, I don't know what to do about this."

"About what?" I ask, surprised to hear him admit he doesn't know how to cope with a situation. Even when he doesn't, Driscoll has never been one to own up to the fact.

"That's just it, Hal," he replies, sighing. "I promised not to talk about it." He waits for me to say something. I don't, so he sighs again, then lowering his voice says, "Do you swear to keep it to yourself if I tell you?"

"That's exactly what you did, isn't it?"

"This is different," he tells me, but doesn't explain the difference. He has aroused my curiosity, though, so I nod and say, "Okay."

He looks over both shoulders, sees no one, then in a solemn tone says, "Melinda Clay is missing."

I wait for more but nothing comes. Perplexed, I say, "So?"

"So?" he repeats exasperatedly. "You know who Melinda Clay is, don't you?"

"Of course I know who she is. How could anybody live in this town and not know? But how does it concern you if the whole Clay tribe is missing?"

"Have you forgotten I'm covering for Granger while he's on vacation?"

I have forgotten, but even after being reminded the connection still escapes me. Steve Granger covers the police beat for the *News-Banner* and Driscoll is filling in for him along with covering the courts, his usual job. I fail to see how it affects him if a young member of Midland's leading family turns up missing. I ask him again.

"They're trying to keep it hushed up. Staley's working on it and only he and the chief are supposed to know about it outside the family. I found out, though, and asked Staley a couple of questions and he had a fit. Said he'd be back riding a squad car if I didn't promise to keep quiet."

Greg Staley, a Midland detective, is Driscoll's buddy and the best contact any of us has

in the police department when we need a little off-the-record cooperation. Alienating him would cause problems, obviously. I say, "So you promised and now you're out on a limb?"

He nods dispiritedly. I appreciate his predicament. A reporter, particularly on the police beat, runs into situations that require sitting on a story, but that usually means being aware of something that will happen in the future, then waiting for it to break. This is different. Driscoll is dealing with something that has already happened and if it's to be kept out of the paper the decision lies with an editor, not him. By telling me he has put me in the same awkward position.

If I am in trouble of someone else's making I want to know why, so I insist on hearing the story. At first each fact must be pried from Driscoll but as he goes on he warms to the task and for a while I am overwhelmed by the amount of detailed information he has uncovered. Eventually, though, he admits Staley briefed him after extracting his promise to keep it to himself.

Melinda Clay, an attractive, unmarried woman of twenty-two, left the headquarters of Clay Brothers International shortly after four o'clock the previous afternoon. Those who saw her later told Staley she

appeared tense, perhaps angry, after a short visit to the fourth-floor office of her uncle, Martin Clay, president of Midland's largest industry.

When questioned by Staley, a company guard named James Short said he watched Melinda cross the street at the rear of the six-year-old Bedford limestone building on the city's east side. She pulled from the parking lot in her new LeBaron two-door, black with tan vinyl top, at a speed Short described as "too fast" and drove north to Indiana 32, then west toward downtown.

When Melinda failed to appear for dinner, served promptly at seven as usual, her mother asked the family's lone male servant if she had called. Charles Morton—butter, waiter, and chauffeur—replied that she had not. Lenore Clay ate alone without further comment. She then had coffee and a glass of sherry on a screened rear porch facing the river and shielded from the noise of light traffic on nearby Burlington Pike by the three story, eighteen-room house built in 1907 by her late husband's grandfather.

At nine o'clock, when Melinda had neither arrived home nor telephoned, Lenore called the house of her brother-in-law a hundred yards north on Wapahani Drive, a cul-de-sac leading only to the four mansions

built by the original Clay brothers near the turn of the century. She was told Martin had gone to Indianapolis and wasn't expected home until the early hours of the morning. Lenore watched television until eleven and then went to bed, although she had grown increasingly apprehensive because Melinda had always informed her of any change of plans.

In the morning she found Melinda still had not come home and again called Martin's residence. By then she was close to hysteria so Martin walked the short distance to her house. At his insistence they did some checking on their own and it was early afternoon before the police were notified.

"Why," I ask Driscoll, "didn't he call the police right away?"

"You know how the Clays are, always trying to set an example for the rest of the town. I guess in Martin Clay's mind having something happen as commonplace as a girl running off didn't go along with the family image. He wanted to keep the police out of it altogether, but Lenore wouldn't go for the idea. Clay wanted Joe Harvey, the head of plant security, to handle it."

"Is that what Staley thinks, that she just ran off somewhere?"

"That's what I think. Prob-

bly at a motel in Indianapolis with some guy."

"Jumping to conclusions again, aren't you, Grady?"

"Come on, Hal, just because she's a Clay doesn't mean the girl's an angel. If it was anybody else the police wouldn't even bother to check it out this soon."

On that he's right. Rank does have its privileges. Or, looking at it from Martin Clay's point of view at the moment, its disadvantages.

After mulling the situation over in my mind I say, "If the *Sun* has the story in the morning you're off the hook. If not, you've got to tell Jake what's going on."

The thought of trying to explain what he's done to city editor Jake Richards makes Driscoll's face sag until he's all jowls. Jake won't appreciate being put in the position of either letting a reporter make deals he must abide by or countermanding the decision with the result that every cop in town will think the *News-Banner* can't be relied upon. Jake will take the problem to Hayden Clarke, the editor. Because it involves the Clays, Clarke probably will go along with the deal. But Jake will be hot about it, figuring Driscoll took too much upon himself and in effect by-passed the chain of command.

Although neither of us says so, I think that for once both Driscoll and I hope *The Morning Sun* finds out what's going on and beats us to the story.

It doesn't happen, though, and I know it even before I drop a quarter in the paper dispenser at my hotel. It isn't across the top of page one on the display copy and that's where it would be if they knew. Unless, of course, the *Sun* has made a deal, too.

The coffee shop is just opening and the waitress is shocked to see me coming down at six in the morning, an hour when I sometimes am getting in but never preparing to go out. I skim over the *Sun* while my coffee cools, confident I won't find the story buried somewhere inside. I'm right.

The morning air is damp and a blustery wind makes me wish I had worn something heavier for the two-block walk to the *News-Banner*. I warm up fast, though, thinking of the approaching scene with Jake. I intend to be there to protect my interests.

Jake eyes me suspiciously as soon as I walk in. He knows something is up; I would never arrive so early otherwise. I pretend not to notice and busy myself elsewhere.

I buttonhole Driscoll the second he arrives and say, "Let's get it over with."

He sighs heavily, as is his custom when unhappy, but goes to Jake's cluttered desk and says, "We have to talk to you. Alone."

Jake turns to me with a triumphant look that conveys more than an "I knew it" or an "I told you so" ever could. He gets up without a word and leads us down the hall to a small conference room. How, I wonder, can an underweight, slightly stooped, sixty-two-year-old body look so formidable? It wouldn't, I suppose, to anyone who didn't know Jake.

He listens to Driscoll's story without interruption, choosing to present a mistreated, hang-dog attitude rather than letting his irritation show. Of course he knows that's harder to cope with than anger. When the story ends, Jake stands up and says, "I'll talk to Clarke when he gets in and see what he wants to do."

I breathe easier, thinking we have escaped his wrath, but when his hand is on the door-knob he turns to me and his watery gray eyes are flinty as he says, "Just where do you fit into this?"

"Grady told me about it last night."

Jake looks around at Driscoll.

"I thought you agreed not to tell anybody?"

"I did, but—" The rest of

whatever he intended to say is lost in a loud snort from Jake and the sound of the door slamming behind him.

It is evening before I see Driscoll again, this time in the bar at my hotel. He's in a foul mood and decides to vent his anger by criticizing the surroundings. "How can you live in a fleabag like this?" he asks, certain the question will get a rise out of me.

He's right, it does. The Delaware may reek of faded glory, may have reached its prime when Coolidge was in the White House, but a fleabag it is not. Perhaps a beautiful debutante now matured to a gracious dowager, a treasure worthy of love and appreciation. I start to tell him as much but stop after a few words, convinced it is a waste on anyone so crass. Instead I ask, "Have you talked to Staley?"

"Nothing new," he says irritably. "No word on the girl, no trace of her car. Would you believe they still haven't put out a bulletin on either one because Martin Clay hasn't given his okay? All Staley's been able to do is talk to the family, a few friends, and a couple of people at the company."

"Doesn't sound like they're too anxious to find her."

"Martin Clay isn't. Well, maybe he is, but he wants it

done without publicity."

"I should think it would be past the point where he has any say in the matter."

"So does Staley and that's what he's telling the chief right now. He's insisting on having a free hand."

"You know, Grady, one way or another the story's got to break tomorrow."

"I know," he agrees without enthusiasm. "So does Staley and he's telling the chief that, too. If he doesn't get the go-

Also a cash settlement for relocating in Midland, one of many towns in the area vigorously recruiting industry.

Each brother possessed a separate skill. Howard was an engineer, an innovator, a master craftsman. Rayburn was a bookkeeper and a canny businessman. Lyle, the youngest and the extrovert of the family, could sell almost anything to anyone. Clifford, the soft-spoken eldest brother, inspired trust so people were willing to

Lori shrugs. "Somebody's murdered her, I suppose. What else could have happened to her?"

ahead, though, and we run the story anyway, I'm still going to be in his doghouse."

Even knowing the power of the Clay family in Midland, it amazes me that it extends this far. When Driscoll leaves again in search of Staley, I review what I know of the Clays and their rise to omnipotence. The four Clay brothers had a small factory in the South before being lured to Central Indiana in the 1890's by free-flowing natural gas wells that everyone assumed were bottomless, and an abundance of unskilled labor.

follow and eager to please. As plant superintendent he had few peers and together the Clays made a formidable team.

At the beginning they manufactured a variety of goods ranging from buggy whips to baby carriages. However, within a few years of their arrival in Midland the area became a hotbed of the emerging automobile industry. Sensing a weak point, Howard designed and perfected a simplified, nearly trouble-free transmission. Soon the other products were forgotten and as competition grew

heated in the infant industry, Clay transmissions were featured in fifty models of automobiles.

Midland had a number of successful businessmen and industrialists but by the beginning of the First World War the Clays had moved to the forefront, had become the torchbearers in every community activity, business and otherwise. They lived by a stern moral code they expected others to follow.

Few did, of course, though many pretended to.

There were children and the sons entered the business, as did the men the daughters married. The firm expanded into other fields but control remained with the family over the years. The temptation to sell stock, to go public, arose many times but was successfully resisted. It became a heated issue when Loyal Clay died in 1977, leaving his two sons as the only blood descendants of the founders in the company, excepting the wives of several executives. Battle lines were drawn with Martin favoring going public, Orval opposing the idea.

Orval, Melinda's father, prevailed but when he died unexpectedly six months ago it appeared that the sale of stock in Clay Brothers International was only a matter of time. In

thinking it over, though, I realize I have heard nothing on the subject in months.

My contemplation, aided by the martinis placed in front of me at regular intervals, is interrupted by the return of a now-beaming Driscoll. The chief has given Staley a free hand, a bulletin on the car and the girl has gone out, the secrecy is ended. The frosting on Driscoll's cake is that only an hour remains until *The Morning Sun* deadline and his opponent on the police beat is a rookie who is miles away at the scene of an accident. Under any conditions Driscoll will have the best story and with any luck it also will be the first.

"How do you intend to play it?" I ask.

"Big," he says, chuckling.

"Seriously, Grady. It's still going to be touchy, you know."

Nothing will bring him down off his high. "Look," he says, "it's public knowledge now. If nothing's turned up by morning I'm going to talk to Martin Clay, then Melinda's mother. Maybe they can steer me onto something."

"Handle it wrong and Martin Clay'll steer you on a one-way ride out of town."

He thinks I'm amusing. "Look, Hal, why don't you come along in the morning and do a quick column on the human interest angle while it's fresh?"

• "Forget it, Grady. You nearly got me in a mess with Jake and you're not about to get me in one with the Clays."

"No guts, huh? Going to kowtow to the big shots. Afraid of losing your plush job so instead of doing it right you'll sit back and hack out more of that ice-cream-social stuff."

I whirl on him, although after four martinis it isn't much of a whirl. "I never wrote about an ice cream social in my life," I tell him. "Okay, I'll go along. And let me tell you, Grady, I'll pack more news into a twenty-inch column than you'll have in a story three times that long."

He slides off his stool, laughing, and leaves a half-full glass of beer behind. Obviously he's serious about this so I decide against one final martini and climb the stairs to my third-floor rooms.

The *Morning Sun* hasn't a word on Melinda Clay and I feel a little sorry for the new kid on the police beat. Someone will further his education when he reports for work after the *News-Banner* is already on the street.

We ride to the headquarters of Clay Brothers International in Driscoll's battered VW beetle, much to my discomfort. "Do you ever clean this thing?" I mutter, trying to touch as little of it as possible with my newest

suit, one barely a year old. He ignores me, of course.

Even though Driscoll has called ahead and arranged to see Martin Clay, actually getting inside his office on the top floor is a little like reaching an inner chamber at Fort Knox. Along the way everything is glitter and glare but the president's office itself is all rich mahogany, soft lights, and ankle-deep burgundy carpet.

The man fits the surroundings. At fifty, Martin Clay is trim. Golf course and athletic club trim. A pencil-line mustache above a mouth that seldom smiles and dark hair streaked with silver give him an aura of success and authority. While the face is familiar, it's the first time I've actually seen it. I guess we don't frequent the same establishments.

In a chair at the side of Clay's desk sits a burly, florid-faced man I recognize as Joe Harvey, chief of security for the operation. A former Chicago policeman, Harvey looks like he'd be more at home behind the collection desk at a loan company.

Clay stands up and extends a hand, though not a warm one, but Harvey remains seated, content to raise a few fingers and say, "Hiyuh, boys." One cold fish, I think to myself, and one bully.

What follows is more of a military briefing than an inter-

view. Clay repeats what we already know, in terse, clipped sentences, obviously looking on it as an onerous chore but one best dispensed with as quickly as possible. When he concludes with, "Any questions?" I almost expect him to tell us to synchronize our watches.

Driscoll sits nodding his head for a moment, then hits a nerve by asking, "Why did Melinda come here to see you Monday afternoon?"

Clay's already thin lips all but vanish. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence he says, "I don't see that that has any bearing on the matter."

"But why did she?" repeats Driscoll. I silently applaud his persistence.

Clay glances at Joe Harvey, who is conveniently examining a fingernail, then turns back to Driscoll and says, "All right, there's no reason not to tell you but it isn't for publication." Driscoll opens his mouth to tell him otherwise but is too late as Clay continues, "Since her father's death, Melinda thinks she should assume an active role in the company and we discussed the matter again."

"You don't agree?"

"Clay women have remained outside the business from the beginning and I see no reason to change policy now."

"That's kind of out of touch with the times, isn't it?"

The urge to toss Driscoll out on his ear is written all over Martin Clay's face. He musters his restraint, looks pointedly at his watch and says, "If there are no further questions—"

"So Melinda left mad?"

"We weren't in total agreement." As he says it, Clay stands up so Driscoll and I do the same, thank him, and head for the door. My hand is on the knob when Clay says, "Do you intend to talk to my sister-in-law?"

"Right," Driscoll replies.

"Please keep in mind that she's a very distraught woman. I'd prefer that you not disturb her but if you do, be discreet about it."

Joe Harvey, still in his chair, looks at us, his pig-like eyes zeroing in on Driscoll. "Yeah, fellas," he says, "don't come down with the heavy hand."

I open the door and Driscoll follows me out without comment. He's seething, though.

When we're back in the car I say, "Are you going to use that bit about Melinda and her uncle disagreeing?"

Driscoll shifts into second and the VW lurches forward violently. "You'd better believe I'm going to use it!"

I admire his nerve but wonder if he realizes that in Midland, tangling with Martin Clay is as risky as playing with a

nest of rattlers. As we travel southeast on Burlington toward the complex of Clay mansions, I decide that he does. I ask myself if I would be equally bold in the same position. As I am not, the answer eludes me.

The red brick Georgian occupied by Lenore Clay is the only one of the huge houses built by the brothers that has ever appealed to me. The others seem oppressive, more like feudal castles than a warm place to go home to at night. Even the grounds are a little too neatly manicured for my taste, although the spacious rear lawns sloping down to the trees lining the river bank are an impressive sight. While they present a far different picture than the rustic scenes of James Whitcomb Riley, somehow on this sunny July morning they make me think of Riley's Indiana.

We are escorted into what I suppose is a drawing room by a man I assume is Morton, the butler. I'm not sure what I expected Lenore Clay to look like, someone more matronly, I guess, but finding her a slim, attractive woman in her early forties catches me off guard. Her dark brown hair is beautifully coiffed, her tailored suit not something taken from a rack in a Midland department store. Only the vacant look of her hazel eyes and the faint redness of her rims betray the fear she has worked

so hard to conceal. For the first time it hits me that when talking of Melinda Clay we are not referring to a cardboard figure, but to someone real, someone loved.

I know it has nothing to do with Joe Harvey's warning, but Driscoll questions Lenore gently. He even manages to ask for a photo of the missing girl with tact. When the preliminaries are out of the way he says, "Melinda has never gone off somewhere for a few days without telling you?"

"Never."

"Weren't there times when she was away at school in the East when she was out of touch?"

"Not really. Even then if she was going somewhere for a weekend or just out of town for an evening she'd let me know. We've always been very close, always enjoyed sharing things. That's why now . . ."

For a moment I fear she's going to break down but Driscoll skillfully steers her onto another subject by asking, "Does Melinda date regularly, does she have any steady boy-friends?"

"She goes out, of course, but aside from Michael she hasn't seen anyone regularly since that young man last winter, that Joel Black. She met him at one of those protest meetings she's always going to and they went out together for a while. It

wasn't a serious relationship and I don't believe she's seen him for months now."

"Protest meetings?"

"About nuclear energy, that sort of thing."

"Does this Joel Black live in town?"

"He's doing post-graduate work at the university. I believe Melinda said he has an apartment on West Adams."

"Who's Michael?" I ask, joining in for the first time.

"Michael Clay, Lila's son."

I try to sort out the Clays in my mind. Lila, I recall, is Martin's wife. "Her cousin?" I ask, realizing too late that my surprise shows.

"Not really. Michael is Lila's son, Martin's step-son. His father was killed in an accident before Michael was born and he was just over a year old when Lila and Martin married. Of course everyone thinks of Melinda and Michael as cousins but they aren't."

"And they date?" asks Driscoll.

"Yes, they've been going out frequently the past few months. They grew up almost like brother and sister but I've noticed a subtle change in their relationship recently, although Melinda just laughs when I mention it."

"Michael lives at home?"

"Yes. Since graduating he's been taking his training with

the company. All the Clay men do that, you know, start at the bottom and learn every facet of the business."

Driscoll looks at his watch, tells her we must leave, and we do. He hasn't much time to write his story and breaks every traffic law on the way downtown. I stare down at the photo of Melinda he has given me to hold. A pretty girl with the brown hair and hazel eyes of her mother, the easy smile of self-assurance. After a few moments I shake my head and turn toward Driscoll.

"Staley's not going to find her," I say to him. "Not alive, I mean."

He looks at me and nods.

Driscoll's story is low-key, less sensational than I expected, but all the facts are there.

The only genuine surmising is in my column, a hastily-written piece that doesn't turn out the way I intended and leaves me dissatisfied. Jake was at his best, taking copy from both of us right up to the last minute, correlating it so the tail end of my column didn't turn up in Driscoll's story or sidebar, and projecting that aura of haste tempered by coolness that maintains a steady flow and brings out the best in everyone.

The Clays are Midland's aristocracy so people are stunned

by the news. For several hours of the afternoon there is a feeling that we have moved back fifty years to the time when newsboys shouted headlines from every downtown corner. The *News-Banner* dispensers are emptied as fast as harried circulation department employees can refill them and outlets around town keep the phones tied up with pleas for more papers. Little else is discussed in the stores, restaurants, and taverns or at the courthouse and city hall. Only down the corridor in the newsroom of *The Morning Sun* is there a stony silence.

Driscoll is exhilarated. He is determined to maintain his edge on the *Sun* staff and continues hot on the trail. In mid-afternoon we knock on the door of Joel Black's apartment and find him home. He admits us reluctantly and I give him a quick appraisal. An average young man but highly strung and with the look of someone always championing a cause, probably a lost one. Driscoll's quick questions make him squirm.

"Look," he says, "I told the police everything I know. Of course I don't really know anything."

"We're just trying to fill in a few gaps," I tell him, trying to sound reassuring. "How long has it been since you've seen Melinda?"

"I'm not sure. A couple of months, maybe longer."

"Why did you break up?" asks Driscoll.

"Break up?" Black echoes. "Look, you've got it wrong. We went out a few times but not on dates. We'd go someplace and talk, that's all."

"About what?"

"Different things. We met at a meeting on nuclear power—the dangers of it—I mean, so we talked about that a lot. Melinda was interested but she wasn't really dedicated. She wasn't serious."

"How about you?"

"About the danger? Yes, I'm very—"

"About Melinda."

Black flushes a little. "Like I said, you've got it wrong. I liked her, sure. I mean I could have liked her a lot but she wasn't interested that way. Not in me as a person, I mean."

"But you tried to get her interested?" Driscoll presses.

"No. Just once I put my arm around her in the car and she tensed up so I backed off. That's all, honest."

Driscoll's line of questioning has run its course so I say, "Did Melinda talk much about herself? What she enjoyed and what she didn't?"

Black shakes his head slowly.

"How about places? Did she ever mention a favorite city or resort?"

"I don't think so. I don't think she ever got that personal." His face brightens suddenly and he adds, "She did say her family has a place up on Lake Wawasee and she likes to spend time there in the summer."

We learn nothing more from Black.

When we are back at the paper, Driscoll phones Staley and finds he knows about the summer home and it has already been checked out by the Kosciusko County police.

We return, this time in my car, to the office of Clay Brothers International, where Driscoll hopes to see Melinda's cousin, Michael. Or the man everyone thinks of as Melinda's cousin. It's only four o'clock but we find he has left for the day.

On the way out we see a company guard and Driscoll asks if he is James Short, the man who watched Melinda leave forty-eight hours earlier. He is, and he tells us much the same story Driscoll heard from Staley.

"You think she seemed agitated when she left?" I ask him.

Short, one of those men who must work at being muscular half his waking hours and enjoys parading around with a gun, badge, and uniform, leers at me and winks. "You know how those rich broads are, pouty about everything that doesn't suit them. Yeah, she was teed off about something but she

acted that way every time I tried to talk to her. Just a little better than the rest of us, know what I mean?"

In his case I know. We are interrupted by a similar type who walks up buttoning the coat of his uniform. Short scowls at him, then at the clock on the wall. "Late again," he says. "That's the third time in a row."

"Sorry," the other man replies but it doesn't seem to bother him.

After the changing of the guard Driscoll makes a phone call from a booth in the lobby, then tells me we are going back to the complex of Clay mansions to see Michael. I begin to wonder if he'll run out of steam in time for me to enjoy the evening.

The massive stone residence of Martin, Lila, and Michael Clay looks as if it leaped out of the pages of a Gothic novel. That's in the late afternoon sunshine, so I try to visualize how it would be at dusk with a fog rising from the river.

Michael waits at the door for us. An almost too-perfect scion of the moneyed class with the unreal handsomeness of a Brooks Brothers model. But there is a tightness about his mouth, a distressed look in his eyes. He stands at least six four and beside him Driscoll seems squat, tubby, and rumped. It's almost a social commentary, an

illustration of the haves and have-nots, the beautiful and the unsightly, the immaculate and the unkempt.

Along with being too pretty, Michael is too cooperative. In the movies and on TV people are usually nasty to reporters. That seldom is true but they are a little wary, a little restrained. Michael acts like we are knights who rode up on white chargers. I get the impression he has us confused with the police, thinks we somehow will bring Melinda back to him, but he should be too smart for that.

He starts with the day she was born and tells us more than we want to know, yet tells us nothing. He has turned her to cardboard again but we can't get him stopped long enough to ask a question or two. The truth suddenly dawns on me—he doesn't really know Melinda. The more he talks, the less real she becomes.

At last he pauses for air and Driscoll says, "How long have you been dating her?"

Michael doesn't play coy. "Since late February," he replies. "Of course we've gone places together since we were kids, but that isn't what you mean."

Driscoll nods. "So you just suddenly fell in love?"

That one throws Michael for a loss. He considers it for a minute, then says, "No, it devel-

oped gradually after she came home from college a year ago. Little by little I came to see her differently from before. I'm not sure I recognized what was happening, though, until after the first of the year when she started dating another man and I realized it bothered me."

"Joel Black?"

"Yes." Michael pauses, then chuckles softly. "So I began monopolizing her time."

"Apparently she didn't mind."

Michael gives him a perplexed look, as though the idea had never occurred to him.

"Did you set a date?" Driscoll asks.

Michael shakes his head. "No, but we had an understanding. I told her how I felt but we hadn't made an announcement or anything like that." He chuckles again and says, "Melinda thought I was kidding at first. We've always kidded around a lot."

He doesn't strike me as much of a kidder. I clear my throat and say, "Tell me, did Melinda feel the same way about you?"

His eyes widen in surprise. It's another idea that never occurred to him. He says, "Of course," then thinks it over a little more. "Of course you'd have to know Melinda. She isn't the type to get mushy, anything like that. But there are ways to express love without putting it into words."

"You mean—" Driscoll begins, but Michael raises a hand to stop him. "Oh, no, don't get me wrong," he says, "I wouldn't think of a thing like that with Melinda. Not now, I mean . . . you know I'm having a hard time getting across what I mean. People can just share a feeling. You understand, don't you?"

I nod my head, not sure if I do or not. An urge to leave hits me so I look at Driscoll and can see he feels the same way. So apparently Michael is right. Getting away from him and out the door takes another five minutes. His parting words are, "You'll keep me posted, won't you?" and again I wonder if he has us confused with someone else.

As we approach the car, a maroon Mercedes pulls up close behind and a petite woman slides quickly from under the wheel. If Michael exuded an air of money, she exudes one of unbounded wealth. She is deeply tanned and her pale blonde hair didn't come from a bottle, or if it did, someone who knew his job was responsible. Her light summer dress probably cost more than my wardrobe. But her eyes have the warmth of a leopard's and they are fixed on us in a way a headwaiter might view a cockroach on the banquet table.

Lila Clay, I assume. I nod, smile, and say, "Good evening"

"Can I help you with something?" she says, not bothering to smile back.

"We're from the *News-Banner*. We've been talking to Michael Clay."

"I'm Mrs. Clay. Why were you talking to Michael?"

Driscoll doesn't like the inquisition. "About his girlfriend disappearing," he says as bluntly as possible.

She turns on him with fangs showing. "I beg your pardon! Are you speaking of his cousin Melinda?"

"Yes m'am," I say, hoping to avoid open warfare. "But we were led to understand there was more to the relationship than that."

She isn't mollified. If anything, she's angrier. "You'd better understand the truth and understand it well," she says in something close to a snarl, looking at each of us in turn. "Print anything that even hints at something other than their family relationship in that paper of yours and it will cost the owners more than both your salaries if you're there a hundred years."

Her approach is definitely not the one to take with Driscoll. "Now just a second, lady," he says heatedly. "Michael himself told us—"

"Damn what Michael told you! He tries to tell people what he thinks they want to hear."

Now mark what I've said about anything you print."

"What's the fuss, lady?" Driscoll counters. "They aren't even really—"

"That's enough! Don't say any more. Now I want—"

"Mrs. Clay, we're sorry if there's been a misunderstanding," I interject. "Have you any thoughts on where Melinda might be?"

"None, and I don't care to discuss it further. Now if you gentlemen"—she comes down heavy on the word—"will excuse me. And keep what I said well in mind." She turns abruptly and strides toward the house.

"Wow," says Driscoll when she is out of hearing. "Some dame." There is the hint of something approaching admiration in his voice.

I shake my head and open the car door. "And you certainly handled her with your usual diplomacy."

The back room at Horner's is crowded but I am content to sit alone at a table, wanting people around but not wanting to be involved with them. Reviewing the day's events, trying to tie all the interviews neatly together so a picture emerges, proves fruitless. A thought that won't quite come together nags at me, makes me feel I should

see something I don't, but the more I try to bring it into focus the foggier it becomes..

My tormented reverie is shattered by the arrival of a breathless Driscoll. He has forgotten the reporters' old axiom: No matter how big the hurry, always walk the last block so you have enough breath to talk and ask questions. Just enough air remains in his lungs for him to gasp, "They've found the car."

"Where?"

"Midland Mall."

"My God, you mean the police have been looking for twenty-four hours and it's been practically under their noses?"

He pants for a moment, then says, "It was backed into a space near the rear entrance by the theaters. Cars were all around it so you couldn't see the license plate."

"What about last night and early this morning? Cars weren't around it then."

"They were until two A.M.—there was a late show. After that the midnight shift was kept hopping. They didn't get back there again."

I shake my head, thinking it's a pretty flimsy excuse. Shoddy police work. I would bet most of the patrol cars managed to get back to the all-night restaurants a couple of times.

Driscoll has recovered enough to down half a mug of beer at

one gulp. He wears a foam mustache as he says, "They've towed it to the police garage and they'll give it a good going over, but there's no sign of violence. Looks like Melinda just parked it and walked away. It's still possible she met somebody there and they went off together for a few days."

"No, it isn't, Grady. That wouldn't fit her pattern. It would be contrary to everything she's ever done. For that matter, there's nothing to prove she parked it there herself, is there?"

"Not yet. Staley has a crew checking out the mall." Driscoll finishes his beer, then gives me a frosty look. "So what do you think happened, smart guy?"

I shrug one shoulder and think about it. "Maybe she met someone, all right, but it wasn't a rendezvous. She may have left with whoever it was, but either she didn't want to or planned to come back in a short time. But hell, Grady, I don't know."

"Then don't be so quick to discount any possibility," he says smugly.

It is late morning when I put the finishing touches on a column for Monday, make a copy, and send it to Jake. When he sees I have finished, Driscoll walks over and says, "I just called Lenore Clay. She gave me the names of Melinda's only close friends in Midland.

Two friends and one cousin. Let's grab a bite to eat, then talk to them."

The idea doesn't excite me. Friday afternoon is the time to get serious about starting the weekend revelry, not for worrying about the things that have worried you all week. Nevertheless, after a sandwich at the Backstage Bar I find myself in Driscoll's blue VW again, heading back to Wapahani Drive. He has called ahead so the cousin, Ellen Stevens, is expecting us. She is three years younger than Melinda and lives with her parents in a grim stone product of an architect's nightmare. Reproducing the battlements, the arches, the towers, would cost millions today if anyone was foolish enough to want to.

Ellen is plain and twenty pounds overweight but the Clay bank account probably makes her a beauty in the eyes of ambitious young swains. She's thoughtful, though, and steers us away from the old fortress to a screened summer house down at the river bank. A chipmunk, disturbed by our arrival, sits upright on a log and chips at us from deep in his throat. Man and the trouble that follows him seem a world away in this pristine setting.

Driscoll leads the girl through a series of boring questions she couldn't possibly answer unless

it were she who engineered Melinda's disappearance. Finally, when I am near the point of dozing off, he says, "What about Melinda and Michael? Were they really serious about each other?"

"Michael may have been," she replies. "Melinda certainly wasn't." All things considered, I suppose it's natural that both are using the past tense.

"You're sure about that?" I ask. "Melinda's mother seems to think otherwise."

She smiles at me, the all-knowing smile of youth. "Aunt Lenore is naive in some ways."

You could have fooled me, I think to myself, but then realize she's referring to the eternal generation gap that prevents a parent from truly understanding a child. And vice versa, of course.

"Well, Michael seems to think otherwise, too," I say a little lamely.

"Michael is out of it," she answers airily. "He decides how things should be, or how he wants them to be, and then that's the way they are. It's funny in a way because up till now it's always worked out for him. He hasn't exactly had obstacles thrown in his path, you know."

A perceptive girl I think, then tell her, "I understand what you mean. His mother would have seen to that."

Ellen sniffs and says, "Aunt Lila still makes him wear rubbers on a rainy day. She absolutely hovers over him." She giggles and adds, "I'll bet she tucks him in at night."

"She's an overbearing bitch," says Driscoll, and gets up to leave.

"Right on, brother," agrees Ellen, still giggling.

When we are heading toward the northwest part of town where Driscoll has set up a meeting with one of the friends, I groan a little and say, "Grady, why are we wasting what could be an enjoyable afternoon this way?"

He doesn't bother to reply, concentrating instead on guiding the stubby little car to Kenwood, a neighborhood more accustomed to Cadillacs, Continentals, and mammoth station wagons driven by tanned women who all bear a remarkable resemblance to each other. The houses are stately, the streets shaded and winding, and soon Driscoll is lost. After wandering aimlessly a few minutes and passing the same intersection three times from different directions, he finally finds the street he is looking for and pulls into a drive leading to a brick colonial nearly hidden among tall oaks and sycamores.

Aside from being a few years younger, Lori Johnson is a car-

bon copy of the women in the station wagons. She is working her way up to their level. Or down, depending upon the point of view. She leads us to a spacious, high-ceilinged living room that doesn't need the air-conditioning that has cooled it to an uncomfortable level. Although the girl is pointedly cordial, something in her manner makes me feel she is well-suited to the temperature.

Driscoll begins by asking if she thinks it possible that Melinda has gone off somewhere with a man without bothering to tell anyone. Lori isn't a giggler. She studies him coolly, head to toe and back again, then says, "Obviously you don't know Melinda or you wouldn't waste time on such a question."

Her snippy reply makes Driscoll flush a little. It shouldn't. If Lori Johnson were as smart as she thinks she is, she'd know we have to ask such questions. But no one ever claimed intelligence necessarily goes with money and big houses and fancy cars.

"So what do you think?" I ask her.

She gives me a similar appraisal, then shrugs. "How should I know? Somebody's murdered her, I suppose."

Her answer probably shouldn't surprise me, but it does. "Why do you say that?" I ask.

"What else could have happened to her?"

"Suppose you're right, any idea who might have done it?"

"Probably one of those sex killers. There are a lot of them around, you know."

I know, but I'm not sure she does. Not many circulate in her crowd. Or drag people kicking and screaming from a crowded mall. "I was thinking more of people who knew her. Any thoughts along that line?"

She shrugs again. "Michael, I guess. Or an older man—I don't know who he was—who was pestering us while Melinda and Tricia Peters and I were having dinner two weeks ago at The Embers. A salesman type, half drunk I think. Tricia and I ignored him but Melinda made the mistake of leading him on, kidding around with him. She enjoyed doing silly things like that."

I'm not sure which of her ideas to pursue first, finally settle on the pest and say, "You're sure you don't know who he was?"

"No. I had never seen him before, and haven't since. The manager escorted him away when he saw what was happening."

"Did Melinda mention him later? Did he even know who she was?"

"She didn't mention him. I don't know if he knew who she

was but they weren't acquainted and she didn't tell him her name. Even Melinda wouldn't have done that."

Driscoll, unable to contain himself any longer, leans forward and asks, "Why do you think Michael Clay might have killed her?"

The look she gives him indicates she thinks it's another foolish question. "Maybe he finally woke up to the truth. Michael can be such an ass at times, you know. I'm not sure he could have taken it."

"Being rejected, you mean?" I ask.

Her smile reeks of superiority. "For newspapermen, some of your questions are almost infantile." She pauses a moment, then adds, "I suppose I should tell the police about the man at The Embers, don't you?"

"Definitely," I tell her, with a few thoughts about infantile questions.

The Embers is only a few blocks south so we stop on our way downtown. The manager is there, remembers the incident, but doesn't know who the man was and attaches little importance to what happened. "The ladies were at a table near the bar and he had one drink too many and tried to get friendly, that's all. Things like that happen but they don't mean anything."

Maybe, but I'd still like to

know who he was. I've had enough for one day, though, and when we are in the car again, I tell Driscoll, "That's it for me. If you're going to see this Tricia Peters, drop me off first."

"We can't," he replies, "she's up at the lakes." He's silent a moment, then says, "Tomorrow's Saturday. Maybe we should drive up."

I snort for an answer. When we get back to the office I don't go inside, just walk down Jackson to the Delaware. But Driscoll is hard to shake and when I go back downstairs after freshening up he's sprawled in a lobby chair.

"Grady," I say, "I'm going in to the dining room to have a martini. Then I'm going to treat myself to a well-done filet. Then a cognac, or maybe two. I'm not even going to think about Melinda Clay."

He follows along anyway. When he's comfortable in a chair at my favorite table he says, "I think we should summarize what we know. Let's hash it out and maybe we'll see something we've overlooked."

"There's nothing to summarize, Grady. Just a hodgepodge of commonplace things in the lives of some very rich and very dull people. If we're going to talk, let's talk baseball."

"The Cubs are looking better."

"The Cubs are in fifth place."

"But they're looking better."

"Than what?"

"Than . . . Dammit, there's something about this case that bugs me but I can't put my finger on it. "You know, Hal . . . " So we hash it out over martinis. Nothing is accomplished and I insist on calling a halt when the salads arrive.

After my cognac and Driscoll's Irish Mist we head for Horner's, three blocks away. It's the tail end of one of those lingering Indiana twilights that create a glow of contented ambience, a feeling that all is right with the world. For the first time in days I'm mellow and my mind is at rest. Nothing, I'm determined, is going to interfere with my plans for a relaxed, pleasant evening. I think about calling Gloria and . . . Then I see the two huskies in three-piece suits climb out of the car parked across from Horner's and start toward us. Unless they've been at the courthouse, which closed hours ago, strangers dressed that way never show up at Horner's.

"Trouble, Grady," I murmur. "Get inside fast."

Instead he stops and turns to face the pair. Foolishly, I do the same even though they don't look any friendlier at close range.

"Driscoll? Blinn?" one of them asks, knowing beforehand that

we are. "Joe Harvey isn't happy with you boys."

"We're not too tickled with him, either," I say, then wish I had bitten my cognac-loosened tongue.

"It's no joking matter," the spokesman says. "Joe tried to find you all afternoon but you were never around. He says he warned you to go easy on bothering the Clays but you didn't get the message so he wants to make himself perfectly clear. Stay away from them from now on. The Clays aren't used to being laid on by nosy newsies so Joe says no more of it. If you want to talk to any of them again you'll have to clear it first with Joe and he doesn't think that's going to happen. Got that, do you?"

The color has spread from Driscoll's collar until even his scalp is red. He makes a guttural sound, then says, "Tell Joe to go—"

"Hold it, Grady," I tell him, laying a hand on his arm as the second of Harvey's strong-arm boys moves a step closer. I look at the spokesman and say, "We'll pass the word to our editors and see what they think about it."

"Do whatever you want," he replies, grinning but not nicely, "except talk to any of the Clays without clearing it with Joe." He turns and walks toward their car, motioning his stooge to follow.

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Even after gulping two shots of Bushmills, Driscoll still quivers with rage. "I just can't believe it," he keeps repeating. "I just can't believe a company like Clay Brothers would send out a goon squad to threaten newsmen."

"Believe it, Grady," I tell him. Yet I agree. Until I learn otherwise, nothing will convince me Martin Clay was behind Harvey's crude approach. He's too smart for such tactics. So I have no problem believing it happened but a big one understanding why.

Rather than making it more comprehensible, a night's sleep makes it less so. It dawns on me suddenly that if I had the explanation I'd probably have the answer to everything. While I'm figuring out the best way of getting it, the desk clerk enters the dining room to tell me I'm wanted on the phone. I push aside my third cup of coffee, irritated by the interruption.

It's Driscoll, of course. He answers my sharp "Yes?" with a cheery "Good morning, buddy. Grab your swim trunks, we're going to the lakes."

"No, we're not, Grady."

"Yes, we are. I've got a feeling about it."

"So have I and it's very negative."

"I'll pick you up at the entrance on Mulberry in half an hour."

"Grady, I'm not riding that far in your VW so—"

"Fine, you drive. I'll be waiting."

"Grady—" but a click and the dial tone tell me I've been flim-flammed. Calling back won't help, he won't answer. I consider letting him stand there on the sidewalk, but then I'd have to spend the day either hiding from him or listening to him harp at me. I kick the leg of the nearest chair, then head upstairs for a jacket and my car keys.

When you say "the lakes" in Midland you mean Tippecanoe, Little Tippy, Barbee, Webster, or, if you can afford it, Wawasee. All are clustered around two little towns ninety miles north, towns like any other little towns around any other lakes. The Clay brothers built summer homes for their families on Wawasee, so going to the lakes became fashionable and has remained so. From April through October the highways are crowded Friday evenings with Midlanders heading north. On Sunday nights they reverse direction. I like to go up myself. About once every ten years to make sure everything's the way I remember it.

When we find the place we're looking for on the west bank of Wawasee, it's a rambling white brick Norman enclosed by a wrought iron fence. Owning it

might change my attitude about weekends at the lakes and Tricia Peters' dad would probably let me have it for a few hundred thousand. But then I'd have to buy a cabin cruiser, get a sun-tan, wear one of those white caps with a black bill and gold piping. Too many complications.

We are there all of two seconds when I realize I will have to do the talking. One glimpse of Tricia and beads of sweat pop out on Driscoll's forehead and upper lip. She has one of those frizzy hairdos, brown eyes the size of quarters, a figure that would send Bo Derek in search of the nearest bar, and a bikini that could be rolled up and not make a bulge in a tight pocket.

It turns out she's easy to talk to, though, but we keep hearing the same old things. Even another giggle when I ask about Melinda and Michael. Then she says, "I ran into them one night at a place in Indianapolis and it was so funny." After another giggle she turns serious. "Actually, it was pathetic. Michael was so attentive and Melinda was so bored with it all. But you know Michael . . . or do you?"

"We've met him."

"Then you know how seriously he takes himself. Melinda says that's because of the way his mother has always doted on him. He's all right, I like him and all that, but he's always

preening and posturing. He's so busy with himself I don't think he understands what's going on around him. He's aware, but unless something's right on the surface he doesn't get the drift."

"Like Melinda not caring for him?"

"Oh, she cared for him but not in the way he thought."

"How would Michael have reacted if he found out the truth?"

Tricia shakes her frizzles. "I'm not sure. It would have taken him a long time to comprehend, if he ever could."

"What about the man who was annoying Melinda at The Embers a couple of weeks ago?"

"Oh, that wasn't anything. Lori got all uptight but she's always doing that."

"You don't have any idea who he was?"

"No, but I saw him again just last night."

My heart thumps a couple of times. I look at Driscoll and he's reacted the same way. "Where did you see him?" I ask.

"At Henry the Eighth's in North Webster. We were having dinner and I noticed him in the bar."

"Did he approach you?"

"I don't think he even saw me. He was with people. His family, I think."

"Do you go there often?"

"No, it was the first time in two or three years."

"Describe him, will you?"

"Oh, I suppose he's about fifty. Dark hair but gray around the sides. That's about all I remember except he was wearing a funny outfit. Real wild pants with beer cans printed on them and one of those flowery Hawaiian shirts."

"How big a man is he?"

"About the size of Mr. Flynn there."

"That's Mr. Driscoll. I'm Blinn." So we want to find a short, overweight man in beer-can pants and a flowery shirt. Even at the lakes that shouldn't be hard.

For some illogical reason, castles and palaces are fashionable along North Webster's one commercial street. One is Henry the Eighth's and like the others it sits incongruously among souvenir shops, barbecue vendors, amusement rides, and a miniature golf course.

The decor is Old English and the bartender is suspicious. He knows whom we are inquiring about but is tight-lipped until Driscoll slips him five dollars. Information comes cheap at the lakes, probably because there is little demand for it. He tells us we're looking for a Denzel Withers, an office supplies salesman from South Bend. He has a cottage on Tippecanoe. The bartender gives us directions and says Withers has been a regular visitor for a dozen years.

He's still wearing the beer-can pants. No one could look less like a man who goes around molesting young women. That doesn't mean much in itself but after talking to him for a couple of minutes I'm ready to cross Withers off the list. He remembers the incident at The Embers and is red-faced while we discuss it. He says he didn't know who Melinda Clay was and seems genuinely shocked to hear she's disappeared. He was in Chicago all day Monday, stayed the night there, and gives us the names of half a dozen people who will verify it.

An hour after saying goodbye to Tricia we're heading south on Indiana 13 toward Midland. I review the morning and decide we've accomplished something in a negative sort of way. When he spots a Jim Dandy in Wabash, Driscoll insists on stopping for a wet tenderloin and strawberry shortcake, which delays us half an hour.

We are five miles north of Marion when we hear the bulletin on a Midland radio station. A woman's body has been found partially submerged in the Mississinewa River about ten miles from Midland.

"That's it," Driscoll says.

I nod, calculating that we are less than forty miles away but will need an hour to get there because of having to drive through Marion. I speed up a

little and we ride in silence until we are on a county road that more or less parallels the Mississinewa. Mostly less because it's a river that has a hard time deciding which direction it wants to flow. Luck is with us, though; a county police car is parked at an intersection and Driscoll knows the man standing beside it. He's diverting all but local traffic from the spot where the body was found a few hundred yards away.

Despite him, a crowd has managed to gather. The police have set up a restraining line but we are waved on through. I find a place to park among a couple of dozen cars, most having Midland, state, or county police markings. A dark green one bears the state conservation department emblem. We walk along a freshly-made path to the river, being warned twice to stick to it because the underbrush is being combed. We find Staley with a group near the water but he's deep in conversation.

Joe McAuliffe, the sheriff, sees us and walks over. "The body's been taken away, boys," he says, then points to a place to the left of the group and adds, "It was caught on those rocks."

"Melinda Clay?" I ask.

McAuliffe nods his head.

"How was she killed?"

"They're going to do an autopsy but she was hit on the left

side of the head with the proverbial blunt instrument. No other visible wounds but don't quote me on this. You know how things show up at an autopsy."

"How long had she been dead?" Driscoll asks.

"Don't quote me again, but probably since Monday. It's been pretty warm this week and the body was badly decomposed."

"Who found her?" I ask.

"A fisherman. That guy over there in the striped shirt. She was pretty much out of the water except for her legs and it gave him quite a turn. Tossed his cookies."

"Was she killed here?"

"C'mon, fellas, we're working on that stuff right now. Be patient a while." McAuliffe wipes his face with a handkerchief, struggling in his mind whether to give in to his desire for publicity or to keep quiet in fear of saying something that will be contradicted later and make him look foolish. The Clay family involvement doesn't make his decision easier. After a minute or so he starts walking, motioning in a conspiratorial manner for us to follow. He stops after we go about twenty feet and restrains us with his arm.

"See that?" he says. "That kind of trail leading up to the road? The body was dragged along there. There's bits of

clothing caught on briars along the way and a shoe up near the road."

Driscoll bends over and peers at a particle of cloth impaled on a thorn, then straightens up and says, "So she was probably killed somewhere else and the body dumped here."

"That's the way I figure it, too," McAuliffe says. He takes another pass at his ruddy face with the handkerchief, obviously hoping everyone will see it that way. He's stuck with the body but wants the murder to have taken place in somebody else's jurisdiction.

"Do the pieces of cloth seem to match the clothes she was wearing?" I ask.

"Most do, definitely," McAuliffe answers. "Of course the boys are gathering everything up and it'll be checked out at the state police lab. But you can see with the naked eye that most of it came from the dress she was wearing."

"Any tire marks up by the road?" Driscoll asks.

McAuliffe shakes his head. "Too dry lately."

"I wonder how much Melinda weighed?" I say to no one in particular.

"One-oh-five, according to the description," McAuliffe replies. "No more than that for sure."

A crew of county policemen has been working carefully toward us, placing scraps of cloth

in plastic bags. One has been photographing every step. We get out of the way and walk to where the group near the river is breaking up. Staley talks to us a few minutes but doesn't tell us anything we haven't already heard from McAuliffe. He refuses to speculate so we leave after Driscoll tells him about locating the man from The Embers.

It's after four when we get back to town and I'd pass up the nectar of the gods in favor of a cold beer. When we are settled at a table in Horner's back room, Driscoll sighs lamentably. "Saturday afternoon," he says. "The *Sun*'ll have two editions out before our next one. Some luck. What do you think about all of it, Hal?"

The jukebox is playing "Marie" again so I say, "I think this is where I came in." He has no idea what I'm talking about so I tell him, "I want to know why Joe Harvey sent his boys to lean on us. The heavy-handed stuff doesn't make sense." I nod toward the jukebox. "It doesn't ring true any more than it would if Dorsey hit a clinker in his opening solo."

Driscoll straightens up in his chair, interested again. "You're right," he says. "Let's find Martin Clay and ask him about it."

"But what about Joe Harvey's warning?" I say, and we look at each other and laugh.

Martin Clay makes no pretense of being pleased to see us but he is more subdued, less the commanding figure. The events of the week have shaken him and it shows in his face and his voice. He is alone in his library, where we have been led by an elderly housekeeper. She looks as if she has been part of the household since the time when Rayburn Clay himself sat in the worn leather chair near the fireplace and read in the soft glow of the Tiffany lamps that still light the room.

We have agreed that I will lead the conversation. I express our condolences, which Martin dismisses with a curt wave of his hand, but before I can get to the purpose of our visit a door closes in the distance and after a few seconds Lila walks into the room. Her features constrict in hostility when she sees us. Her lips part as if she intends to speak, but close again after she darts a look at her husband. After acknowledging her, I turn back to Martin and say, "Mr. Clay, we appreciate the turmoil your family has been experiencing but were surprised you'd have Joe Harvey warn us off like he did, try to intimidate us into staying away from you and the rest of the family."

He stares at me uncompre-

hendingly. "What are you talking about?"

"About two of Harvey's goons threatening us last night," Driscoll tells him.

For a moment he looks even more bewildered, then his face hardens and he's the tough executive again. He lifts the receiver of a phone on his desk as he says, "I still don't know what you're talking about but I'll find out in a hurry."

Lila takes a step toward him, her bronzed features yellowish now. "Wait, Martin," she says softly, and then more determinedly, "I had Joe tell them to stay away from the family."

He lowers the phone to its cradle, lets his hand rest on it as he studies her the way a scientist might study an unfamiliar organism under his microscope. A few tense seconds go by, then he shakes his head disbelievingly and says, "You did that, Lila? Why, for God's sake?"

"They were bothering everyone, upsetting people and making nuisances of themselves." Her confidence returns with a vengeance as she gains momentum. "I caught them nosing around here the other day, prying into our affairs and threatening to print malicious lies and gossip. They had Michael so confused he didn't know what he was saying and they used the same tactics with El-

len. They wouldn't even let poor Lenore alone. I decided someone had to look after the interests of the family and told Harvey to do his job and keep them away from us."

"His job . . . ?" Martin repeats, but doesn't know what to say after that.

The time to get out has arrived, I decide, and say, "We were just curious. No need to trouble you further."

Neither of them responds, or even seems aware of our leaving. It would be interesting to linger in the hallway, hear what Martin says when the explosion comes, but it wouldn't be wise so we keep going. When we are in the car again, Driscoll launches a diatribe but I can see he is a little amused by finding Lila was responsible for Harvey's actions. When his chatter becomes tiring I say, "Any idea where we might find Staley?"

"How about the police station?" he replies sarcastically. It was a foolish question but it served its purpose and he is quiet the rest of the way.

We find Staley behind a mound of papers on his desk. His face, thin under any conditions, is drawn with fatigue and he welcomes the suggestion of a sandwich and cup of coffee. We walk a block to the Delaware and enter the deserted dining room. When we

have ordered I ask whether the autopsy has been performed.

Staley nods and says, "If she hadn't been a Clay they wouldn't have done it until Monday. I haven't got the complete report but we were right, cause of death was the blow to the left side of her head. There were other scratches and cuts but all came after death from being dragged through the underbrush."

"Why do you suppose the killer dumped her there?" Driscoll asks him.

"Probably thinking the current would wash the body downstream and we'd never know where it entered the water. The river's low, though, so it only went a few feet and then caught on the rocks."

"The killer must know the area to have picked such an isolated spot," says Driscoll.

"Not necessarily. He could have just driven around the back roads looking for a place and you can see the river from the road along there."

"Any ideas about the weapon?" I ask.

"A bottle in a paper bag," Staley replies. "A fairly large bottle. Traces of the bag and fragments of glass were still in the wound and the liquid stained her dress. They're checking everything at the state police lab and with a little luck we'll know what was in the bottle

and which store the bag came from. Or narrow it down to a few, at least, assuming it came from the mall."

"Checking the stores out there hasn't paid off yet?"

"No. Melinda was known in a number of them, but no one saw her Monday and none of her charge cards was used. It's only a guess, but I don't think she ever went inside. Another guess is that she was killed with a wine bottle, and if that proves out it will narrow it down to one drugstore in the mall. Assuming again that it came from there."

Driscoll shoots a knowing look my way. "So you think she met somebody there, right?"

Staley bites into his sandwich and shrugs. "Probably, but it would have been an accidental meeting in my opinion and would have occurred in the parking lot. Of course it could have been prearranged or she could have been forced into a car, but that's unlikely. I think she ran into someone she knew, got into the other person's car, there was an argument and she was killed."

"A spur-of-the-moment murder," I say.

"Right. And that's going on the assumption it took place between the time she left her uncle's office and the time she was due home for supper."

Driscoll, looking owlsh, says,

"Somebody might have followed her there."

"I've thought of that," Staley replies. "At this point I'm not ruling out any possibility completely."

"Any theories on who killed her?" I ask.

"Not yet, except I think it was someone she knew and thought she had no reason to fear. Right now we're trying to piece the facts and the suppositions together. Maybe after we get the lab reports . . ."

"I have a theory," I say.

Driscoll turns to me, his mouth opening in surprise, then twisting in a sneer. Staley just stares across the table, waiting for me to go on. I clear my throat a little self-consciously and say, "It's only a hunch, understand, without anything solid to back it up."

At first Driscoll can't decide whether to take me seriously, but as I go on he begins to get a little excited. Staley listens impassively. I conclude by telling him, "Remember, it's based on a different approach from the one you have to follow and hinges on things that were said when you weren't around to hear them."

He sits quietly a few moments, running it back and forth in his mind. Finally he shrugs and says, "Even if you're right, there's nothing I can do about it at this point."

"Yes, there is," I tell him. "Lay it on the line, including what you think the lab reports will show, and I'll bet you get a confession. I think I'm right, Greg."

"Yeah, and if I follow your advice and you're wrong, by the time the Clays finish with me I wouldn't be able to get a job as town marshal in Oakville. I'll sleep on it but don't count on anything."

When Staley goes back to the station, Driscoll sits nodding his head a while. When he tires of it he says, "You know, it's funny, you coming out with what you did because it's what I've been thinking, too. I didn't say anything because I didn't want Staley thinking I was trying to tell him how to do his job. That was a nice touch, throwing in that about his not being around to hear the things we did."

You never really know what's going on in another person's mind. Maybe Driscoll really had been thinking along the same line.

Sunday has always been a day I could do without. I hate the deserted downtown streets and the feeling that everything is in limbo. More often than not, I don't wander beyond the lobby of the Delaware, where people are coming and going or busy

at their jobs. Life goes on in the hotel and I am content to sit back and watch it or ignore it as I choose. Sometimes I read, or even doze, and if the waiter isn't in sight when my glass is empty I ring the little bell on the nearest table. Late in the day, when they have grown bored with whatever they were doing, Driscoll or Granger or Gloria Thompson often drops by and even Jake Richards has been known to walk in purposefully, motion for me to follow, and head for a stool at the bar.

So it comes as no surprise to see Driscoll and Staley entering the revolving door from Jackson Street. I tear a corner from a page of *The Sunday Sun* and slip it between two of those in the book I have been reading. Staley settles in a chair at a right angle to the couch where I'm sitting and Driscoll takes the one beside him. I nod toward the bell but both shake their heads.

"I'm holding a briefing with the Clays at Martin's house," Staley says to me. "It'll be off the record unless I say otherwise, but you're welcome to come along."

"A briefing?" I say, raising an eyebrow. "I didn't know it was police procedure to hold briefings with the victim's family."

"I'm learning lots of new routines on this case."

"Do you mean a briefing or will it be a confrontation?"

"A briefing, at least at the beginning. If it turns into anything more it'll happen of its own volition. Frankly, I don't think it will."

"Then why are you letting us tag along?"

Staley grins just a little. "That's the same question the chief would ask if he knew. I've been thinking about what you said, though, and figure having you there just might jar something loose. But you're to keep your mouths shut unless I give the okay, understood?" I nod and he turns to Driscoll and repeats, "Understood?"

We go in an unmarked police car recognizable on sight to every petty thief, hustler, and con artist in Midland. Painting it in red and white checks wouldn't make it any more so. At such times I focus on the block ahead, watching certain figures fade into doorways and mouths of alleys or turn to stare at a display window suddenly alive with interesting objects.

When we arrive the elderly housekeeper escorts us to a living room where Martin stands posed before a massive stone fireplace. Without a fire it has a menacing look, like some giant mouth ready to devour anyone who ventures too close. Lila and Michael are waiting, too, as is Ellen Stevens and several fam-

ily members I don't recognize. In a dark corner off to one side of the fireplace sits Joe Harvey. Only Melinda's mother is missing. Ellen waves a hand and smiles tentatively at Driscoll and me, but the others acknowledge our unexpected presence with stony glares.

Michael appears to have spent a sleepless night. His features are wan and tight, his eyes vacant. Lila makes no pretense of being anything but bored and impatient. Martin is an enigma. His manner, his expression, could reflect impatience, too, but more likely it is indignation that the well-ordered routine of the Clays has been shattered by events that to him seem inconceivable. I have the impression he would like to have someone to blame for all this, preferably someone who could be given the sack. Two of the other men, obviously husbands of Clay women, glance at Martin every so often in a way that indicates they are relishing his discomfort.

Staley chooses a chair that has him facing the family, gathered now near the fireplace in a loose semicircle. Driscoll and I take others at his left and slightly behind him. A hush falls over the room and all eyes are fixed on Staley, who clears his throat uncomfortably and begins. He leads them step by step through what has hap-

pened, what is still in the process of being checked out, and finally what he believes happened at the mall and his opinion that the lab reports will enable him to find the killer.

A few seconds of silence follow, then Martin says, "But what about suspects and motive? Haven't you made any progress in those areas, don't you have any theories?"

"We feel certain she was killed by someone she knew," Staley replies. "Probably someone she knew quite well and felt she had no reason to fear."

Michael shifts position, grows more attentive. "Why?" he asks.

"Because she apparently got into the killer's car willingly. It's unlikely force was used. She would have been on the passenger's side and wasn't expecting violence, was caught completely off guard. And we don't believe the murder was premeditated. More likely there was a quarrel, a sudden burst of anger, and the blow was struck with the only weapon handy. It adds up to someone Melinda knew quite well and felt safe with."

"But what possible motive could anyone have?" Martin asks testily. "Especially someone who knew her well. It doesn't make sense to me."

"When does murder make sense?" Staley answers. "You're familiar with the usual mo-

tives—greed, jealousy, passion, pride, revenge, and so on. Fitting them to this case, greed could be related to business, passion and jealousy to unrequited love, pride to the family name and reputation—"

He is interrupted by one of the men I don't know saying, "Are you implying that a member of the family killed Melinda?"

"I'm not—" but again he is interrupted, this time by Martin's indignant, "By business, I suppose you mean the difference of opinion Melinda and I had about her playing an active role in company management?"

Staley shifts uncomfortably, feeling he is under attack. But it is only the beginning. Lila, her face ashen despite its suntan, rises suddenly and leans toward him, almost tottering. In a near-whisper from deep in her throat she says, "You're accusing Michael, aren't you?"

"Mother—" her son begins, but she cuts him off with a wave of her hand and continues, "You're looking for a scapegoat, someone to arrest just to make yourself look good."

Staley is taken aback. Under other conditions he might be angry but these are people of power and influence who could hurt him badly. It has gotten out of hand and he doesn't know how to regain control.

The thought flashes through

my mind that I should say something in his support, but Driscoll is quicker to respond. He is on his feet, saying, in a surprisingly calm yet steely voice, "You're wrong, Mrs. Clay. It's you we think killed Melinda."

They stand facing each other, Driscoll and Lila Clay, while the rest of us sit in stunned silence. The seconds tick away on a Seth Thomas upright. Finally Lila looks to her left at her husband and son, then to her right at the others. Her rage has been triggered and there is an animal wildness in her eyes. She is more than just haughty, proud, and possessive, she is sick of mind.

"Is that what you think?" she says to Driscoll in the same throaty whisper. She glances left and right again and repeats, "Is that what all of you think?"

She is frightening in her fury and no one responds, no one offers the reassuring word that might calm her. Even Driscoll, now that his flare of temper has cooled, is awed by her and remains silent. For a brief moment we are powerless and she is in command. Fortunately she didn't come armed.

It is Lila herself who breaks the spell with a hysterical laugh that in itself is frightening; a sound of madness from deep within some chamber best left

unopened. She has begun to tremble and her voice trembles, too, as she says, "Of course I killed her. I did it for you, Michael. I did it for all of you."

The words provide a release and suddenly her rage evaporates. She slumps back down in her chair, still trembling, still ashen, but no longer menacing. Nothing now but a sick, frightened woman, completely alone even in the midst of those most dear to her. An outcast who has burned her bridges and not so sick that she is unaware of it.

Michael is the first to speak. "You, Mother? You killed Melinda?"

She turns to him, eyes pleading. "You understand, don't you? You could see what she was doing. Chasing you the way she was. So shamelessly. She wasn't thinking about the family, about how it would look to have cousins marry. Can't you imagine what people would have thought, how they would have laughed behind our backs? And it wasn't because she cared about you, you know that. She was just using you. Using you to gain more power in the company. Just ask your father, he'll tell you."

Martin Clay has risen from his chair and stands staring down at her uncomprehendingly. He slowly shakes his head and says, "My God, Lila."

Staley, who either has for-

gotten such things as the rights of the accused or no longer cares, leans toward her and asks, "Did it happen at the mall, Mrs. Clay?"

For a moment she continues looking at Michael, then turns to Staley and says, "Yes. It was just as you said. I was leaving and saw her get out of her car. I thought it would be a good time to talk to her in private. She went with me to the car, but she wouldn't listen to what I was telling her." She pauses and turns to Michael again. "Melinda laughed at me. She didn't care about you, she thought it was funny."

Her head bows, the fight drained from her. The words are barely audible as she says, "I really don't know what happened then. Something just seemed to pop in my head when she laughed. I don't remember hitting her. The brandy from the bottle was running down my arm and she was dead, that's all. I didn't know what to do so I pushed her down on the floor where no one could see and drove around out in the country, trying to think. Then I saw the river and . . ."

Staley and Driscoll remain with Lila, Martin, and Michael, but the others drift away, chattering among themselves like a flock of busy sparrows. I go outside, too, filling a pipe and wanting a drink badly.

Ellen Stevens leaves her parents and walks back to where I'm standing. "Was all that true, Mr. Blinn?" she asks. "Did Aunt Lila really believe that about Melinda?"

"Apparently so," I reply, thinking how stilted, how conventional it must sound to her.

"But Mr. Blinn, didn't she know? I thought everybody knew. Melinda didn't keep it a secret."

I stare at her, puzzled. "Keep what a secret?"

Now she is puzzled and returns my stare. "You mean you don't know? Didn't you understand what I was saying? Melinda was a lesbian. She didn't plan to marry anyone, ever. I thought everyone knew but Michael, and I couldn't understand why he didn't."

And that, I realize, is the missing piece. The one thing I couldn't put my finger on even though I was aware of knowing something that wouldn't come into focus.

I look down at Ellen, shaking my head. "You and Lori and Tricia knew. Probably her close friends at school, too. But no one else did, Ellen, none of the older generation. Certainly her mother didn't and I think it would be best not to say anything now, don't you?"

"But if Aunt Lila had known . . ."

"You're right, of course, but

it's too late to think about that now."

She turns and starts toward home again, walking slowly and murmuring, "If I had just said something, Melinda would—"

"Ellen," I call after her and she looks back. "Don't saddle yourself with that."

She stares at me vacantly a moment, then goes on her way.

Driscoll has joined me at the bar in the Delaware and he's unhappy. "The timing was all wrong," he complains. "The *Sun* had the story today about finding the body and in the morning they'll have the one about the arrest."

"Yours will be better," I say consolingly. "Firsthand information is always better."

I have decided to keep what Ellen told me from him, however. Nothing would be gained by mentioning it even though it isn't something he'd use in his story.

Driscoll doesn't want to be comforted. "She'll never stand trial," he says. "I won't even have that to write later."

I can't suppress a chuckle.

"Grady, it's too bad events like this can't be arranged to fit your schedule."

He opens his mouth to retort but instead nods his head, and grins a little.

It is close to midnight when Staley joins us. We take our drinks to a corner table and sit in silence for a few moments. When Staley's glass is empty he sets it down and says, "I'm not taking anything away from you guys, but we'd have put it together ourselves in a day or two."

"We know that," I tell him. "Our encounters with Lila gave us an edge, plus that dumb trick with Joe Harvey. Like you, we figured it was someone Melinda knew and it had to be someone too small to carry a hundred-pound body from the road to the river instead of dragging it. But it was what we heard about Lila and what we saw of her ourselves that gave me—" I glance at Driscoll "—that gave *us* a headstart."

"You know," says Driscoll, "the whole thing was so stupid when you think about it."

I grin wryly. "More than you realize, friend, more than you realize."

UNSOLVED

by Jerome Meyer

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

During the first week of World War II in Europe, when the Germans were closing in on Poland, a man was seized at Cracow and accused of being a spy. He said he was a census taker and had information on the population of Polish cities. In his pocket the police found the following note. What does this harmless list of cities with their population really mean?

1940		1940	
City	Population	City	Population
Kratlact	684,371	Strawpnaw	583,149
Shronty	54,362	Dipeensef	1,498,675
Bieringo	437,586	Shawket	4,635

Why was the man arrested?

*"The Spy," taken from Puzzle Quiz & Stunt Fun by Jerome Meyer,
© 1948, 1956, 1972 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.*

See page 154 for the solution to the December puzzle.



Armand Assante as Mike Hammer in *I, the Jury*.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Mickey Spillane's tough guy-private eye best-seller lurks somewhere in the background of *I, the Jury*, but it isn't always easy to find. In the role of Mike Hammer setting out to avenge the murder of his old army buddy, Armand Assante comes out of any number of hardboiled novels and movies. He has a cheap, one-man office, a beautiful blonde secretary, and most of the time a two-day growth of beard. He is soft-spokenly ironical, makes love to beautiful, mysterious women, and is a relentless stalker who alternately takes beatings and pushes people around.

As everyone knows, Spil-

lane's Mike Hammer was a shocking character because he did more than push people around: he killed quite a few of them into the bargain. It appears to be the one thing about him that was understood by the makers of this movie. Needless to say, Hammer's killings are minutely detailed in living color. Even before the movie opened, there were complaints about the violence. But as it turns out, it isn't so much the violence itself that sins as the movie's failure to understand Mike Hammer's character.

Spillane's Mike Hammer killed in the service of what he regarded as a principle of ethics. He was convinced that the

police and the criminal justice system had gone soft. If he were foolish enough to find and then deliver his buddy's killer over to the authorities, a smart lawyer was sure to get him off through some kind of loophole in the law. Thus there is no justice. "But in the end," Spillane has Hammer explain, "the people have their justice." How? "They get it through guys like me once in a while."

That was the idea of *I, the Jury*—and it was pretty well carried out in the movie version made back in 1953 (see Peter Christian on Hollywood versions of Mickey Spillane in this past June's AHMM). In contrast the new *I, the Jury* could have been called *I, the Executioner*. Gone are the novel's ideas about justice, crude as they were, and gone is the fast talking, passionately committed Mike Hammer. In the role of the avenging detective, Armand Assante does not explain himself. Instead he mumbles along in a barely decipherable street accent. As for his ethics, he is introduced in the act of casually betraying a client by hopping into bed with his wife.

Who would have thought that the characters and actions of *I, the Jury* could be simplified?

When the book came out in 1947 it was the last word in primitive, direct action thrillers. After having been brought up to date to 1982, though, the original begins to look positively subtle, especially about sex.

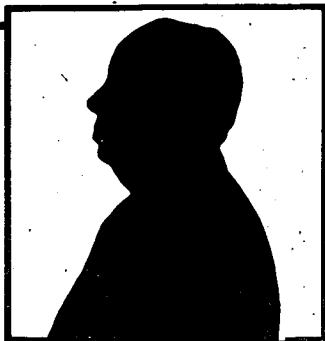
The lady doctor of the book now runs a sex clinic, where Hammer and the movie audience naturally have to spend a good deal of time observing the nearly hard-core goings on. There's a sex maniac murderer, too, whose activities demand the same close scrutiny by the camera.

The only improvement over the book is the energetic performance of comedian Alan King as the crime kingpin, Charlie Kalecki (in the book he's named "George"). This character's every word can be clearly understood, and for this alone one regrets his having to be bumped off along with nearly everyone else who crosses Hammer's path.

We are told that the CIA is responsible for all of the sex and violence, murder and mutilation, but I prefer to blame Robert Solo, Larry Cohen, and Richard T. Heffron—the producer, writer, and director of *I, the Jury*.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



Cats have always had a sense of the mysterious about them, and have slunk their way through a many a melodrama on stage and screen. The current Broadway hit, *Cats*, taken from the poems of T.S. Eliot, is devoted to their private netherworld, and one of the feline brood the musical spotlights is clearly inspired by Sherlock Holmes's nemesis, Professor Moriarty. Even the arch mehitabel has been represented both on stage and in an animated film. But most cinema cats have tended towards the sinister.

Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Black Cat," has been filmed a number of times, starting in the silent era, but never more passionately than when the expatriate Austrian director Edgar G. Ulmer tackled it in 1934. The setting was changed to the remote Balkan fortress home of a sinister engineer (Boris Karloff), built on the site of an old war battlefield where thousands have died, "the largest graveyard in the world." Karloff dabbles in satanism, and naturally a slinking cat is never far from his reach. To this forbidding retreat come a stranded honeymoon couple and a strange doctor (Bela Lugosi), whose late wife Karloff had stolen years before. Lugosi harbors grim thoughts of vengeance and has, as well, a morbid fear of cats.

Cats have often been the familiars of villains. The most famous screen example is the continuing presence, through several James Bond films, of the snarling white Persian belonging to the evil

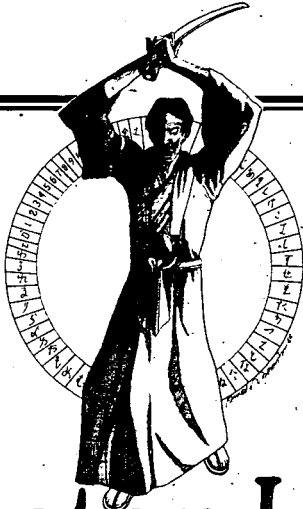
Blofeld, head of an international terrorist organization. We never see Blofeld's face during *From Russia With Love*, his introduction to the Bond saga—only his hands stroking the animal. When, in a later film, 007 has his climactic violent encounter with Blofeld, the Persian darts deftly out of the way to avoid catastrophe.

Films dealing with occult themes are littered with cat familiars, of course, from comedies like *Bell, Book and Candle* and *I Married a Witch* to all-out devil-worship dramas like *The Mephisto Waltz*, in which a musician trades in his soul for fame as a pianist. Sometimes cats are used allegorically in mystery film titles. *The Cat and the Canary*, the celebrated stage thriller that has been made into at least three movies, refers mainly to the plight of the heroine, a threatened bird trapped in a strange house where stalking relatives have gathered for the reading of a will. *The Case of the Velvet Claws*, a Perry Mason mystery brought to the screen, is actually about a scheming woman accused of murder. The Ellery Queen novel *Cat of Many Tails*—made into a television feature titled *Ellery Queen: Don't Look Behind You*—deals with a strangler called "The Cat" who terrorizes New York by striking at seemingly random victims. *The Chinese Cat*, a Charlie Chan mystery, is a vanished statuette in which an uncut diamond has been hidden.

Cats have played a variety of other roles in mystery movies. In that classic ghost film *The Uninvited*, a cat is afraid to go up the stairs of a certain house because of the nameless evil that lurks there. Eleanor Parker is a wealthy recluse who shares her home with a swarm of cats in *Eye of the Cat*, and it is someone's else abject dread of felines that sets the stage for her murder. (Interestingly, several scenes in this film—true to its title—are in cat's-eye perspective.) Old women who live alone, surrounded by cats, are murder targets in several mysteries, especially in *The Cat Creeps*. And, of course, Val Lewton's classic *The Cat People* deals with ancient legends of certain women who, when crossed or aroused, change into huge cats.

Even Disney has cast cats in villainous roles—the vicious Lucifer in *Cinderella*, the sneaky Siamese twins in *Lady and the Tramp*, and Gideon who helps abduct *Pinocchio*. Cats, however, can be on the side of law and order, too. In *That Darn Cat*, a Siamese helps the FBI crack a case. And currently on television, *The Witch of Laurel Canyon* is a lady detective who gets psychic flashes from her cat Dickens. These days, in which our cat veneration seems almost Egyptian, the animal seems to be purring its way into our mysteries as well as our hearts.

FICTION



Inspector Ueki And The Potter's Gift by Ron Butler

It was the season of high skies and fattening horses.

The flawless blue vault of the heavens and the golden days of harvest are a time in Japanese proverb when both horses and men put on flesh, offering proof of earth's merciful bounty. And, on the perfect Saturday evening when I sat in Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki's garden, I could find no discordance in life.

The twins, born several months earlier, were prospering, sleeping inside peacefully,

plump and contented. As the last of twilight faded, bringing out pinpoints of starlight on a purple-black background, Noriko and the inspector joined me on the long stone bench by the garden wall. We sat together in companionable silence, so relaxed in each other's presence that words were not needed. Noriko, my wife and the inspector's daughter, seemed to grow lovelier with the passing of each day, and I knew that Inspector Ueki took considerable pleasure in our happiness.

Illustration by Ken Boroughs

Soon, the autumn moon would rise, the occasion for our visit to the home of the inspector and his spouse, Hanako. There was, for me, an overtone of wonder, of being in some enchanted land where majestic, mist-veiled mountains kept timeless watch over a people who still believed that moon-gazing was not out of place, was, in fact, a spiritual necessity.

Tonight was *Jugoya*, the moon of mid-September, and throughout the island archipelago people were gathering for viewing parties. Young lovers would hold hands, perhaps sighing for each other and the celestial jewel above, and poets would compose in their imaginations the artful strokes of the pen that would build on the threads of legend and verse whose origins lie in the far past of India and China.

"What are you thinking, Sam?" the inspector asked.

I took a small pebble from the garden path and tossed it into the air, laughing as a flutter of leathery wings proved that the bats that nest in the mountains were as alert as ever for flying insects of the night. "I was thinking that the age of space exploration kind of takes the mystery out of lunar contemplation."

Noriko smacked my hand lightly with hers. "Sam, if you truly believed that, you would

not be sitting here now so serenely."

I smiled, aware that both Noriko and the inspector were sharing my contentment. By the time Hanako came out to be with us, there was a glow of silver radiance on the horizon. Slowly, with a majesty augmented by our own tranquility, the harvest moon floated above the peaks of the distant mountains, bathing the garden in argentine softness.

The mellowness of the occasion gradually dissolved as my concerns drifted ahead to the business requirements of the coming week at the computer hardware office I managed. With the addition of the twins to our lives, more money was going to have to be put aside, which meant that more was going to have to be earned.

I had grown oblivious to the moon, putting together bits and pieces of ideas for a new advertising campaign, when I heard the iron gate in front of Inspector Ueki's house slide open on its rails. "*Gomen, kudasai*," a voice called out. Excuse, please. "Is anyone at home?"

The inspector went to see who the unexpected caller was, and moments later I heard him greet the visitor cordially before returning to the bench. "This is a very old friend of mine, Takayasu Arima."

Arima-san bowed to me, then

held out his hand. "I have heard much of Mr. Sam Brent, and meeting you is a pleasure."

After I thanked him for the compliment, Noriko lit the stone lantern in the garden and went inside with her mother to fix refreshments. I took a last look at the moon and brought myself fully back to the present.

"The problem," Arima-san said, "is that I am not at all convinced that the death of the potter's wife was accidental."

"But," Inspector Ueki said, "what reason do you have for believing this to be the case? There was, on the date of her death, an earthquake, and this would not be the first time someone has been killed by falling objects."

Arima lit a *hamaki*, and I tried to slide down the bench inconspicuously as he exhaled smoke from the pungent Japanese cigar. "Right enough, inspector, but during my years as an investigator for insurance claims, I have seldom encountered so many questions that I am unable to answer to my satisfaction."

The inspector crossed his legs and leaned back against the wall. "Please go over the facts again, Arima-san."

"Gladly. Nagisa was the wife of Harunori Yokoyama, who makes Bizen pottery in Kurashiki. Only six months ago, Ha-

runori took out a large policy on her life, one for almost fifty million yen. Among the strange aspects of the situation, however, is the fact that Harunori did not insure himself, and I have since ascertained that his pottery business has been faltering for some time."

Ueki seemed to be somewhat bored. "Yes, yes, Arima-san, but all of the evidence suggests that she was killed when a large shelf holding pottery toppled over on her. From what you have said, the Kurashiki police confirmed the cause before approving the certificate for cremation."

Arima-san removed his glasses and put them in his shirt pocket. "Inspector, why would a woman be in the display room of a shop well after closing hours, at a time when she and her husband should be at their home together? The quake struck only minutes before midnight, and it was a mild jolt, just strong enough to make light fixtures sway."

"I gather," the inspector said, "that you want me to use my influence to make additional inquiries?"

"Yes," Arima-san said. "I am not reluctant to ask a man of your reputation for help."

Ueki shrugged and smiled. "Friends exist to help. Sam and I will take a few hours on Monday so I can go over the case

with my colleagues in Kurashiki."

What made him think I was going? We finished the beer and strips of dried cuttlefish. Arima-san apologized for staying so late as we said our farewells at the gate, and I went to help Noriko get the twins ready for the ride home.

"This," I grumbled, "is not exactly the bullet train." The windows on the crowded commuter train were open, letting in puffs of dust and factory fumes.

Inspector Ueki took a Cherry cigarette from a new pack. "Correct, Sam, but it is quick and it is cheap, qualities you seem to admire."

A few minutes later, while I was still sulking over the unfairness of the remark, we pulled into the small station at Kurashiki, which, like all railroad terminals in Japan at that time of day, was filled with black-uniformed school children, salesmen lugging sample cases, businessmen in dark suits and black shoes, and the usual influx of country folk laden with bundled gifts and looking disoriented in the unfamiliar surroundings.

We walked outside and queued up for a taxi to take us to the Kurashiki police station. "I calculate," the inspector said, "that we will be back in Oka-

yama in time for lunch."

There was a good deal of work awaiting my attention at the office, but I relaxed, secure in the trust I placed in Goto-san, our chief clerk. Nothing important would be neglected, and, I reasoned, I could make the trip worthwhile by buying a gift for Noriko.

The Kurashiki sergeant of detectives, Makio Hanabusa, was unsympathetic. "If there were even the slightest cause for suspicion, Inspector Ueki, we would not have issued the death certificate."

"Naturally," Ueki said, smiling, "but you understand that I am here only because I promised a friend who investigates insurance claims. He seems to think the woman was murdered for the money." Ueki held out his lighter as Hanabusa took out a cigarette. "Once I have read the reports, I will have fulfilled my promise."

Detective Sergeant Hanabusa nodded. "Yes, I can appreciate that, inspector." Then he relaxed, opening his mouth in a smile which revealed a gold front tooth. "You can sympathize with my apprehension."

"Why is that?" Ueki said, frowning.

"When a man of your reputation requests details on a closed case, one must wonder if one has been negligent."

Inspector Ueki laughed. "You are most kind, Hanabusa-san. Now, it should take only minutes for me to make some notes from your report." He reached over and took the folder from Hanabusa's desk.

We weren't going to be back in Okayama in time for lunch, but I was forced to admit that Inspector Ueki's burgeoning doubts in the death of Nagisa Yokoyama were justified. As I sat at the coffee house table, waiting for the inspector to complete his call to Okayama police headquarters, I reviewed our findings so far. To me, it was becoming more and more significant that the potter's shop was located in the center of the Kurashiki business district but his home was almost seven miles distant.

Why, then, as Arima-san had asked before, should Mrs. Yokoyama be at the shop at such a late hour? The police report stated that her body was found under a shelf in the midst of shattered vases when the potter entered in the morning.

Harunori Yokoyama had told the investigating officers that it was not unusual for his wife to be at his place of business by herself occasionally, going over the accounts or setting out new specimens of his work.

But didn't he worry when he discovered that she was not at

home on the morning after the earthquake? No, the quake appeared to be nothing more than a brief rumble, receiving only minor attention on the news, and he assumed she had returned while he was sleeping. Yes, it was out of the ordinary for Nagisa to leave before breakfast, but he decided that she was in a hurry to complete the arrangement of the sample shelves before the start of the business day.

Where was her bicycle? In its accustomed place, next to the spot where he parked his own bicycle at the side of the shop.

And there were other items, gleaned from surrounding store owners by the inspector, that served to whet our curiosity. These merchants all claimed that the potter was spending hours away from his store instead of working at the kilns. They believed he was with his friends, probably at his home. Further, the merchants said, Harunori appeared to be strangely detached from the continuing decline in his sales, cut off by unknown reasons from the realities of economics. Yet there was no evidence of enmity between the potter and his wife. On the contrary, Ueki was told, it was the general belief that they were dedicated to each other. The lone point of clarity was that it was going to take more time to sort out the

conflicting bits of information in a satisfactory manner.

The inspector returned to our table as the coffee began to percolate under the blue flame of the alcohol lamp. "Did the superintendent go along with letting you take a longer look at this problem?" I asked.

Ueki sniffed the dark brew with pleasure. "Yes and no."

I waited until he filled the paper-thin cups. "That's a vague answer, Toshihiko."

Ueki dropped two cubes of sugar into his cup and stirred. "It is relatively simple, Sam. I am allowed to investigate, but not on my own. Kurashiki and Okayama are in the same prefecture, but the police jurisdictions are separate. My superiors are calling Detective Sergeant Hanabusa. If he agrees to reopen the investigation, I will work under his direction."

I savored the strong coffee. "I should call Goto-san and Noriko and tell them we'll be late."

"Yes," the inspector said, "this may require a few hours more."

Detective Sergeant Hanabusa insisted that we stay overnight at his home. Acceptance of the offer, I believed, was one of his unspoken conditions for reexamining Nagisa Yokoyama's death; his admiration for Inspector Ueki was marked, and I also knew that he wanted the opportunity of talking to

one of the few foreigners living in his part of Japan.

We could not refuse, and after a meal of prawns and oxtail soup in a downtown Kurashiki restaurant, I called Noriko again and asked her to let Mrs. Ueki and Goto-san know that we might be absent for another day. Hanabusa drove us to his home, where he made the ritual apologies for its humbleness and we responded with the ceremonial praises for domicile and garden.

There was no western furniture inside, and the tatami was bright and clean, retaining the pleasant smell of fresh straw; we were taken to a seven-mat room for the entertainment of guests, and Ueki was given the honor of sitting in front of the alcove. Mrs. Hanabusa brought several bottles of Sapporo beer, and we started our discussion of the next day's procedures.

"It is my suggestion, Inspector Ueki," Hanabusa said, "that we approach this carefully. After all, our investigation found Nagisa Yokoyama's death the result of an accident, and I consented to further inquiries mostly on the strength of your accomplishments in police work."

Ueki acknowledged the latest praise with a nod of his head. "That is understood, Hanabusa-san. Kurashiki is your city, and I do not wish to

be the cause of embarrassment." The inspector directed his gaze toward me. "Sam, you may provide us with a legitimate excuse for talking to the potter without causing him to be suspicious."

I thought of all the work mounting on my desk. "Your ideas concerning my contributions to your work usually lead to trouble, Toshihiko."

The inspector grinned. "Not this time, Sam, I assure you."

"I don't know . . ."

Ueki refilled my glass. "Sam, all I want to do is to introduce you to the potter as a wealthy American buyer. Although he is still in the expected mourning time, I think that he may be persuaded to show you some of his better vases."

"Ah," Hanabusa said approvingly, "that is a clever proposal. But what do you expect to discover once you see him?"

The inspector stretched his legs out in front of the *zabuton* cushion. "Attitude, Hanabusa-san, attitude. We shall see if he grieves or rejoices in his secret heart, and if we have cause, we will try to devise a trap for him."

Hanabusa's wife went outside to light the gas heater for our bath water, and I borrowed the inspector's notebook to write down some more possibilities for my planned advertising campaign.

Early in the morning, in the cool moments before the sun rises, we stood in Hanabusa's garden, looking up as flights of geese honked their way across the clear blue autumn sky. From the hills to the west came the stroke of temple bells. It was going to be another beautiful day, and I tried to concentrate as Hanabusa coached me in the basics of Bizen pottery. I would have to know them if I intended to pass myself off as a knowledgeable buyer.

The making of Japanese ceramics, I was informed, arose far back in prehistory, some thirteen thousand years before the present, with the oldest pottery remains found in the coastal areas of Okayama Prefecture. But Bizen? I didn't find it as interesting as Ueki and Hanabusa claimed. It was unglazed pottery, with dominant tones of brown and grey, treasured for the subtle discolorations caused by falling ashes as it was fired. What impressed me most was the price tag—more than fifteen thousand yen for a vase no more than six inches tall.

"I don't know if I can fake it," I said. "One pot looks pretty much like another to me."

The inspector looked at me thoughtfully. "Then all we can do is hope that you can feign aesthetic feelings for a brief time. At any rate, all of this may be unnecessary."

"I do not understand," Hanabusa said.

Ueki lit his third cigarette of the morning. "What do we do if the potter refuses to see us?"

No one could answer that.

There were no difficulties. Harunori Yokoyama, when Inspector Ueki made his telephone call, said he would see us at any time that was convenient. Hanabusa, we felt, should not accompany us, as he was known to the potter from the initial investigation. The Kurashiki policeman called a taxi for us and left in his car for the police station.

The potter's house was built at the foot of a hill, close to a sinuous stream and a dense stand of tall bamboo bordering the back of a vegetable garden. As the taxi backed out of the narrow lane, Yokoyama, dressed in a black house kimono, came out on the veranda, bowing, face somber. I judged him to be in his late sixties. Like many men of his generation, he was of short stature—no more than five four—but the impression of dignity he conveyed made him appear much taller.

"I am Toshihiko Ueki," the inspector said, "and this is the American I told you about, Mr. Sam Brent." Yokoyama bowed again to each of us and asked us inside. We stepped out of our shoes at the threshold and took

slippers from the floor stand. The potter showed us to the formal matted room for company and excused himself to bring us something to eat and drink.

The household altar caught my attention. Underneath a framed photograph of the potter's wife was a dish holding a candle, along with offerings of flowers and water. The brushed memorial inscriptions, made by a priest, were stark in their simplicity.

As Yokoyama returned to the room carrying a tray with tea and small cakes, I turned away from the altar guiltily and sat on a cushion by the table.

Inspector Ueki was the first to speak, looking pointedly at the altar. "I am afraid that we are intruding at a bad time."

Yokoyama-san carefully poured tea. "As you can tell, Ueki-san, this is a period of sorrow for me, but I cannot allow my personal troubles to turn away a man who has traveled so far to see examples of Bizen pottery. I must tell you, however, that my own work is not representative of the best."

"That," the inspector said, "is not what I have heard."

Yokoyama's smile was a blend of shyness and shame. "From the pace of my sales, one would have to conclude otherwise."

"Well," I broke in, "it might be a temporary thing—part of the problems with inflation."

Yokoyama looked at me closely. "Not only do you speak Japanese, but you do so with the distinct dialect of Okayama."

My blunder was inexcusable, but Inspector Ueki chuckled.

"You are an observant man, Yokoyama-san. Yes, it is correct that Mr. Brent, who happens to be my son-in-law, is an American who has lived here for many years." He helped himself to more tea. "And it is also a fact that Mr. Brent is interested in purchasing a gift of quality for his wife."

Yokoyama pulled on the sleeves of his kimono and stood up. "I do not think you have told me everything, Ueki-san."

"No." The inspector got to his feet and faced the potter. "I am an inspector of police from Okayama City."

The potter walked over to the altar and looked at his wife's photograph. "Do you have questions about the manner of my wife's death? Perhaps you think I killed her for the insurance money." His tone was matter-of-fact.

Ueki shrugged. "These questions do exist, and were raised originally by the company that issued the policy. But, I feel that it is fair to advise you that I am now officially concerned with this, as are the Kurashiki police."

The potter turned around,

eyes on the alcove. "Inspector, despite the reassurances of certain friends, I, too, am starting to find it hard to believe that Nagisa left this world under such bizarre circumstances."

"What kind of reassurances?" the inspector said.

Yokoyama hesitated, then asked us to go with him to a room toward the rear of his house. In a few moments, I was staring down at something beyond my comprehension—a table covered with a circular piece of paper inscribed with the *hiragana* alphabet, the characters for the days of the week, and the four major points of the compass. On top of the design sat a triangular device fashioned from three sections of bamboo.

The inspector drew his breath in sharply through his teeth. "Incredible!"

"Do you recognize this?" the potter asked.

"Yes, and I think you can appreciate, Yokoyama-san, why it may be essential for us to arrange a session with your friends—if you still feel that they are friends."

There were nuances and intimations here that left me in the dark, but I didn't butt in. The inspector, I knew from past experience, would explain when he was ready.

The potter looked directly into Ueki's eyes. "I owe it to my

wife's memory to remove any uncertainties concerning her death. You may count on my full cooperation."

"I will be in touch soon," Inspector Ueki said. "Sam, we must make another trip to the Kurashiki police station. Would you please call a taxi while I have a few more words with Yokoyama-san?"

As I listened to Goto-san's explanation during a lull in our paperwork the next day, I found it increasingly difficult to keep track of all the complexities involved in Nagisa Yokoyama's death.

My clerk wanted to know, first of all, how much Inspector Ueki was able to tell me about the contrivance we saw in the potter's house.

"Only that it's used to . . . ah, to call a certain Kokkuri-san. The inspector didn't have time to go into the fine points."

Goto adjusted the blue sleeve garters he wore above his elbows. "I am not certain about the origin of this belief, Bulentu-san, but I will try to explain."

Goto did a valiant job of keeping it simple, and I was able to follow most of what he said. Kokkuri-san was the collective name for the gods of Dog, Badger, and Fox. By using the apparatus we saw earlier, the three gods, if summoned prop-

erly, were supposed to operate the bamboo pointer so that it answered questions and gave advice.

"Where does the name come from?" I asked, thinking of the Ouija board some people used in my own country.

"It comes from the old Chinese. *Ko* is the Red Fox God, the Dog God is *Ku*, and the God of Badgers is *Ri*. We combine all three with the Chinese pronunciation."

I shoved aside a pile of signed, stamped work orders. "You mean to tell me people take this seriously?"

Goto grinned. "I know about it only because I watched a special program on television some time back. Most young people have never heard of Kokkuri-san, but some of the older generation claim that it works—if you believe."

I returned my good friend's grin.

"What about you, Goto-san? What do you believe?"

Goto picked up the papers bearing my approval. "What I believe, Bulentu-san, is that we get behind in our work whenever you and Inspector Ueki stumble into one of these situations."

Stumble? "Thanks, Goto-san. At least you won't have to get mixed up in this one."

"I am glad," he said, just loud enough for me to hear.

Detective Sergeant Hanabusa's question as we sat in front of his desk two days later was to the point. "What leads you to think that Harunori Yokoyama is innocent of wrongdoing in his wife's death—if indeed there was wrongdoing?"

Inspector Ueki tapped ashes from his cigarette. "At first, I was inclined to believe her death was the consequence of an accident. But I was unable to resolve the puzzle of why the potter's wife would leave her home at a late hour to visit their shop. Ultimately, I relied on what we might call a subconscious evaluation, based on years of police work. It is my current opinion that Nagisa was murdered, but not by the potter."

The Kurashiki policeman looked at me. "Would you care to give us your assessment?"

There were a lot of things I could have said, drawing analogies from my familiarity with computers, sounding off on the necessity of limiting inferences to program design, expounding on data parameters and correlations. Instead, I heard myself telling him, "Like Toshihiko, I've got a gut feeling that Yokoyama is innocent of murder, but my instinct makes me wonder about those unknown friends of his, and that deal with Kokuri-san."

There was a glitter of metal

as Hanabusa smiled. "Instinct is the constant companion of a good policeman." The smile gave way to a serious expression. "I would like to know, Inspector Ueki, more about the plans for tonight."

Ueki depressed the button on his digital display watch. "Surely, and I see no reason why we cannot do it over lunch."

Harunori Yokoyama felt the loneliness gather about him as he stood near the altar. Outside, as the evening shadows spread, a brisk wind came up, stripping brown and gold leaves from the sugar maples by the potter's house, carrying a hint of chill that signaled the approach of cool weather. Through the windows on the west side, the potter could see the color of the clouds above the mountains shift from orange to pink as the sun sank lower in the sky.

Soon, he thought, he would light the altar candle. The potter lowered his head, lost in painful memory. What is right and what is wrong? he asked himself. Nagisa's death would mean wealth in the days to come, money that would provide support for himself and his longtime friends—funds that would benefit all of them as his artistic abilities continued to wane with old age. But the potter knew that he would ex-

change the money willingly for even the smallest fraction of the years of warmth and affection he had spent with Nagisa.

Did he believe—*could* he believe—what Saburo Akieda and Kazuo Sakamaki led him to each night in this very house? Or was it simply that he *needed* to think her spirit was happy, was with the Great Buddha, released by a benevolent gesture of the gods from the long, terrible illness for which she adamantly refused treatment? Yes! It was only because he was weak that he could have been influenced by her observation that there was no cure for her affliction, only methods of prolonging a painful life. That weakness, he groaned inwardly, was the first stone that formed his pathway across the River of Self-Delusion.

Delusion—and deceit. There were no medical records to hinder the approval of the insurance policy that Nagisa—and his friends—said was both reasonable and necessary. "It will sustain your artistic genius if I die before you," she said. He gave in, never dreaming that six months later she would be gone. He let himself be swayed by wife, friends, and the frequent sessions with Kokkuri-san. Yes, the gods said each time they were consulted. Yes, take out the policy. Believe. Believe.

Hands pressed in prayerful attitude, the potter bowed before the altar, speaking the invocation to the Buddha of Light: "*Namu Amida Butsu.*" He sighed and let his mind take him back to the night of the earthquake.

The cold and fever were abating, but Harunori was still miserable. For a moment, he did not comprehend what Nagisa was saying.

"I am going to the shop."

He sat up in the *futon*, protesting. "At this hour? Why?"

Nagisa gently pushed him back down on the floor bedding. "Because, Harunori, your illness has kept you away too long, and Kokkuri-san advises me to work hard on the displays. People may then see that your talent has not diminished."

Were they consulting Kokkuri-san without him? All right. Saburo and Kazuo were old friends, men whose lives intertwined with his all the way back to childhood. It was natural for them to look after his interests.

Harunori gazed into his wife's eyes; they seemed to be veiled, shaded by something she did not want him to know. But . . . it must be the fever. He and Nagisa never kept secrets from each other. "Go, then, but please do not remain long. You

need rest, too, Nagisa."

"Sayonara," she said. Farewell.

Sayonara. Sayonara. The words, Harunori slowly realized, were only echoes now, mocking and accusing from that last night he saw her alive.

The room was dark, and the potter ran his fingers along the altar until they brushed a box of wood matches. He struck one and touched it to the candle.

Sayonara. The face in the photograph was blurred, eerily insubstantial in the flickering light of the candle, and suddenly the potter recalled the sound of her bicycle as it left—jerky, unsure motions on the gravel, unlike the smooth, certain starts she always made.

Then there came that other sound—the muffled din of a small car engine. Saburo's car. The longer he dwelled on the meaning of his recollections about that night, the more determined Harunori Yokoyama became to avenge what he was seeing for the first time as a monstrous act, one made more dreadful by his own unwitting and witless complicity.

The potter walked to the hardwood chest in a corner of the room, kept lovingly polished by Nagisa since the day he took her as a young bride. Opening it carefully, he felt for the long bundle stored near the

bottom, removed it, and pulled away the layers of soft cloth.

Here, in his hands, was both history and part of his personal heritage, precious beyond monetary value. Harunori held the object out, able to distinguish, even by the feeble light, the subtle striations and lamination marks, feeling the supple strength. It was a symbol of honor, and of the courage of the ancestor who stood with it by his side as armies gathered from all of Japan awaited the invasion fleets of Kublai Khan.

Yuki. Courage. So. Even a humble potter could possess it, could face the truth and act accordingly. The potter of Kura-shiki looked at Nagisa's picture one more time and went to ready himself for the arrival of the night's guests.

Inspector Ueki, Hanabusa, and I crouched behind the partially-opened *shoji*, able to hear clearly what was being said in the room at the rear of Harunori Yokoyama's house. Three men were assembled there—the potter and his two friends, Saburo Akieda and Kazuo Sakamaki.

The one source of light from within was the candle that was a necessary part of the ritual. The shadows it cast danced frantically on the rice paper panels of the *shoji* door when the bamboo planchette was set

on the circular design. Now the invisible presence would be called forth to guide the fingers resting on the pointer, answering, urging, and warning as the tip of the triangle slid from character to character.

There was the shuffle of feet as one of the men took the candle and made his way slowly out of the house to the nearest crossroad. There, candle in hand, he would summon the three gods, but there was an element of uncertainty: Fox and Badger were said to dislike Dog, and Kokkuri-san, so it was told, will not unite in his triadic form if the summoning person sees or hears a dog, or if anyone present was born in the Year of the Dog.

The bearer of the candle returned, shucked off his outside slippers, and padded to the table: "Has the offering been made?" someone asked.

"Yes," Harunori Yokoyama answered, "we have put out the sake and fried bean curd."

"Good," the same voice said. "Let us begin. What do you wish to ask, Harunori?"

"One thing only," the potter said. "Why did you deceive me and murder my Nagisa?"

Something fell to the floor with a clatter. The planchette? "Now you have ruined it, Harunori, with shocking nonsense!"

The potter's voice was sub-

dued. "All I am doing is putting an end to falsehood. Listen, please. On the night you killed Nagisa, I was ill, not attentive to the obvious, but I have thought back and realize that it was not Nagisa who left here on her bicycle, but one of you—Kazuo."

"Wait . . ."

"Silence! After Kazuo left, I remember that Saburo's car pulled away."

"But," a voice insisted, "this has no meaning, Harunori! You are upset, that is all."

"No," the potter said, "I am not upset, nor am I mistaken. When Nagisa left home, the wall clock showed it was already eleven thirty at night, a fact that carried no special significance until I remembered that the earthquake struck before midnight. She could not have made the bicycle trip to the shop in so brief a time, and, Saburo, you are the only one of us who can drive a car."

"What do you imply?" The voice was cold, carrying a trace of menace.

"That you, Saburo, somehow convinced Nagisa to go with you to my store. Then, Kazuo, you rode the bicycle."

The voice I associated with Saburo Akieda came through the thin panels next, contemptuous, sardonic. "Harunori, you must be an idiot if you do not understand that Nagisa not only

was aware of the plan, but agreed to it!"

"Agreed to her own death?"

The potter's voice remained calm.

"Yes," Saburo said, "exactly so. She took Kokkuri-san's advice and accepted the rightness of the decision. Instead of suffering hopelessly, she embraced a noble death, with our help, in the knowledge that you would not be left needy."

"Who?" the potter asked.

"Which one of you freed her so nobly?"

"That," replied Saburo, "is unimportant. Kokkuri-san commanded us to act together, as one, and it is lamentable that you lack Nagisa's wisdom and bravery."

"Lies!" The potter was shouting now. "First you used your tricks with Kokkuri-san to convince Nagisa that her life should be insured. Then you plotted a murder that would look like an accident, planning all the while to talk me into believing that her death was an act of mercy by the gods, and that Kokkuri-san would want me to share the insurance money with you—dear, trusted friends!"

There was an interlude of silence before Saburo spoke again. "Admit, Harunori, that the insurance money appealed to you. You told the company nothing about her illness."

"Yes," the potter said, his voice so low I could barely hear

him. "For a time, I assured myself that there was no harm in it, that she would live for years more. But now I can think clearly and know what must be done. Look at this carefully, both of you! It is my final commentary on your treachery!"

This was getting out of hand, and I was turning to nudge Inspector Ueki when Saburo and Kazuo cried out in unison. Startled, I stepped back from the *shoji*. Filling the translucent panels like flowing, living ink was the silhouette of a man, kimono swirling, knee bent, sword high above his head in a two-handed grip.

I shoved back the *shoji*. Detective Sergeant Hanabusa was moving toward the haloed candlelight, trying to unsnap his holster flap. Ueki darted ahead of him, revolver swinging up in his hand at the same instant the sword sliced down in a silver arc, ending one man's piercing scream of terror.

"No! Stop!" The inspector's urgent plea rang throughout the house. I saw the sword flash once more, simultaneously with the burst of light and sound from Ueki's weapon. The candle, swept from the table as the second man slumped over, sputtered and went out.

All I was immediately aware of was the surge of pulse in my ears and the bitter dryness of my mouth.

Detective Sergeant Hanabusa called for an ambulance while the inspector tried to make Harunori comfortable.

The potter's kimono was soaked with blood, but his voice was strong and, I thought, free of fear. "Please do not take any trouble for me."

Ueki folded his jacket and put it under Yokoyama's head. "I am so sorry. I want you to know I would give anything to have avoided this."

"I am the one who has mistakes to atone for, inspector, not you." The potter coughed and turned his head toward me. "When I first met you, you said that you wanted a gift for your wife. You will find the best vase of my career on the table in the alcove, and it is my wish that you should have it."

"But . . ."

"No," Harunori Yokoyama insisted, "it is yours. Study it, and you may think better of me, fool that I have been." The potter closed his eyes and died.

I looked again at the three bodies in the room, then at the two policemen. "I need some air."

Hanabusa, face set in tight lines, suggested that we wait outside for the arrival of his men.

In the garden, feelings hidden under the starlit night, I listened to the dry, whispery rustling of bamboo in the breeze,

like the ghosts of ancient sages come to cluck their tongues at modern folly.

"There is still much we do not know," Detective Sergeant Hanabusa complained as we sat in his office, filling out reports. "How can we be certain who was directly responsible for the murder, and how was it accomplished?"

The inspector was unusually subdued. "It is my estimation, Hanabusa-san, that Saburo Akieda killed Nagisa after he drove her to the shop, then waited for Kazuo to arrive with the bicycle. It was important for them to make it appear that she went to the store alone."

"How was she killed?" Hanabusa's voice was tired.

Inspector Ueki held an unlit cigarette between his fingers. "Outside the shop, in the back, are the kilns, stacks of wood, and Yokoyama's tools. Your men may find there the object she was struck with."

"Yeah," I said, "but what about the earthquake?"

"Coincidence," Ueki said. "Instead of leaving the body where it would look as if she had fallen in the dark and hit her head, they were provided with a perfect cover for the killing. They took her into the shop and pushed a shelf of pottery over the body."

Hanabusa got up from his

desk and went to a pencil sharpener on the wall. "We will never know absolutely what took place, but I find it beyond belief that the woman agreed to such a brutal fraud."

"We will have to assume," Ueki said, "that Nagisa's pain and her love outweighed conventional reason and ethical behavior." His shoulders sagged. "Saburo and Kazuo may have deserved death, and I am sickened because I shot Yokoyama trying to save them. If only I had moved in to make arrests when we heard enough..."

"Let's go, Toshihiko," I said. "We don't want to miss the last train home."

The Kurashiki station was virtually deserted at the late hour, and the empty, hushed platforms added to our depression.

Noriko ran her fingertips over the Bizen vase, picked it up gingerly, and turned it in her hands. "It is a lovely gift, Sam."

"Yes," Inspector Ueki said, putting his coffee cup down on our kitchen table, "but I am unable to fathom the potter's suggestion that Sam should study it."

"Oh, Father," she said gently, "that is not too difficult. If you

are too critical when you examine Bizen ware, you will see isolated imbalances, and what seem to be defects. But if you stand back and look with an understanding eye, you can see the beauty of this creation, something distinct from all others of its kind despite superficial similarities."

"Noriko," I said peevishly, "I don't want to be dense, but what does that have to do with what we experienced?"

"The potter meant, Sam, that he wanted you and my father to see his life—a human life—as a whole before passing judgment on any one part of it, to try to see the best of all people, including yourselves." She touched the inspector's hand. "Do not be so harsh with yourself, Father. The potter would have wished otherwise."

Inspector Ueki took a deep breath and smiled. "Thank you, Noriko, I do feel better. Sam, let me take you out for a drink."

I looked into Noriko's eyes. "No, thanks. I think I'll spend some time with your amazing daughter."

"That, Sam, is an admirable ambition." His footsteps, as he walked to the car, were firm and sure. We waited until he left, then put the twins to bed.



FICTION

The Angel

by Ben Satterfield

Illustration by Ken Boroughs

Snowcroft parked by a fire hydrant and started to get out, but Ritter grabbed him by the arm. "Is that the place?" Ritter asked, pointing to an old brownstone. It was a three story apartment building with an elevated porch and bell arches over the downstairs windows.

"That's it."

"I remember now," Ritter said. "The landlady's name is Rosker."

Snowcroft let go of the doorhandle and leaned back in the seat. "Been here before, huh?"

"About six months ago. A junkie was living in the basement, and the old lady was sure he was dealing because people were coming and going at all hours."

"Just like a police station."

"Anyhow," Ritter went on, "she called us, wanting to get rid of him. Said he was bringing criminals in and keeping her awake. We made three arrests and I sent her a 'good citizen' letter." He looked at the house and saw a curtain flutter in the front apartment. "One other thing, the landlady thinks my name is Reiter."

Snowcroft grinned. "How'd she get an idea like that?"

"People hear what they want to hear," Ritter said, getting out of the car. "You know that."

Snowcroft lumbered out and joined him on the sidewalk. "And you never set her straight, huh?" He was still grinning.

"It's easier this way."

They went up the steps. Just as they reached the front door, it opened and a small gray woman wearing a knitted shawl and wire-rimmed glasses greeted them. Her hair, pulled back in a bun, was the color of flint. "Lieutenant Reiter," she said, ducking her head. "*Shalom aleichem*." The dress she wore was dark and reached almost to her ankles, which were wrapped in thick stockings that looked like canvas.

"*Aleichem shalom*," Ritter said, bowing slightly. "I'm glad you remember me, Mrs. Rosker. This is Sergeant Snowcroft."

She looked up at Snowcroft and bobbed her head, then took Ritter by the hand and pulled him inside. "Of course I remember you. What a *simmes* that was! Dope fiends—oy! No life for a widow. And now this—it's terrible."

"What happened?"

She shrugged dramatically, spreading her arms and hands out, palms up. "Who knows? Such a nice boy he was. Always polite, never made a fuss, and paid the rent on time." A woman wearing

a frayed yellow bathrobe and curlers all over her head was watching them from a doorway at the end of the hall. "Not like others I could name," Mrs. Rosker said, and the door closed. The landlady shook her head as if thoroughly disgusted. "Some people are so nosy."

"Where's the body?" Ritter asked.

"On the top floor. A rookie up there, too, but I told him not to touch anything."

"Good for you." He glanced at Snowcroft. The big man sighed and began trudging up the stairs.

When he was out of sight, Mrs. Rosker leaned close to Ritter and said, "Why've you got a *shegetz* for a partner? What happened to the nice *lantsman* who was with you last time?"

"Lelchuk? He was killed."

She let out a long low moan of displeasure. "Such a dangerous business you're in. How can you stand it?"

"For the most part it isn't dangerous at all. I spend more time behind a desk than anywhere else."

They started up the stairs, slowly, the landlady holding onto Ritter's arm with one hand and the railing with the other. The knuckles of her fingers were red and swollen.

"That's where you should be, behind a desk. My son Arnold is a CPA. Makes a nice living. You don't get killed being a CPA."

"I was never good at math," Ritter said.

"Who knows math?" she answered. "Adding machines, calculators, computers—all you need to know is which buttons to push."

"In a way my job's like that, too."

"What are you talking? People killing each other, criminals running amok—I know what your work is. I watch the television."

Ritter smiled.

A young patrolman came down the stairs hurriedly, as if anxious to get away, but slowed when he saw them. "Lieutenant," he said, and Ritter nodded.

"You didn't touch anything, did you?" Mrs. Rosker asked.

The young man colored, but answered politely. "No, ma'am, everything's just the way it was." As soon as they were past him, he scurried down the stairs.

"He's just a boy," Mrs. Rosker said. "No older than—" She stopped, as if reluctant to say the name of her boarder, as if the mention of it would disturb his death. "I found him about eight thirty," she went on softly and tightened her grip on Ritter's arm.

"Why did he have to do it here and bring all this trouble on me? Don't I have enough misery without this? Day and night these tenants give me *tsuris*. Drove my husband Leo to his grave and now they're after me. Why? Why do these things happen?"

"People are unhappy," Ritter said.

"I never bothered him, he shouldn't have done this to me," she said bitterly. "Take it out on someone else."

"You found him at eight thirty?"

"I knew he was in his room because he hadn't come down to go to work. He always goes to work at eight A.M. I thought he might be sick."

Ritter waited for her to continue, but she seemed to have finished.

"So you went up to check on him," he prompted.

"What's this 'check on'? I don't check on people, I mind my own business."

"I meant you were concerned about him, so you went up to see if he was all right."

"I'm no busybody, but I knew something was wrong. *Oy!* Was something ever wrong!"

"You knew he had come in last night?"

"I heard him—he was alone, by the way. I know all the footsteps, and I thought his sounded a little slower or tireder than usual, but I didn't think much about it. Everybody gets tired, don't I know!"

"What time was that?"

"About midnight. I was watching a movie—Paul Newman it was—when I heard the door. I turned down the volume and listened—just to make sure it was someone who belonged, you understand. There's so much crime these days, I have to be careful. As my husband Leo, *alevasholem*, used to say, 'Worry is better than regret.'"

They had reached the top floor. She led Ritter to the door, but she made it clear that he would enter alone. "I don't want to see that again, I'll wait out here." She seemed to shiver and pulled her shawl tighter around her. "The way you see him is the way I found him. I didn't touch a thing. I went straight downstairs and called the police."

"Can you tell us anything about him? His friends or relatives, what he did, things like that?"

Mrs. Rosker shook her head. "Friends he didn't have. He was quiet, didn't drink, didn't do anything that I know. He worked steady and kept to himself. A real loner." She leaned closer to him

and whispered, "A lot of *goyim* are like that, you know, all locked up inside."

Ritter grunted and reached for the door.

"But until today he never caused trouble," she added. "He was *edel*."

"Maybe that was his problem." Ritter pushed open the door and saw the body lying on a cot against the dingy wall. The apartment was small and sparsely furnished, with one window in the center of the room opposite the door, a bathroom on the left, and a small kitchen in an alcove on the right. Everything needed painting.

Snowcroft was busy going through a writing desk in the corner of the room. "This one's going to be easy," he said.

"Just what it looks like, huh?"

"There's an empty pillbox on the counter in the kitchen next to a glass it seems he used. Prints will tell us for sure. Anyhow, he left a note and the signature on it matches the one on his driver's license and union card. There's no evidence of—"

"Where's the note?"

Snowcroft got up to hand him the paper, and whispered, "What's *edel*?"

"A person who's modest." Ritter thought a moment, then added, "Quiet, humble—a kind of shy Boy Scout."

"It fits."

Ritter turned to the note, which filled a page of lined tablet paper and was signed and dated. The handwriting looked like that of a schoolboy, the uneasy and cramped script of one not accustomed to writing.

My name is Thomas Wayne Hutchins and I come from a little town close to Elkins, West Va. I last lived in Hazard, Ky but I dont have people there. My folks are all gone.

I dont know anyone in this city. Theres a girl lives down the hall that I wish I knew, she is so pretty it makes my heart hurt, but I cant even talk to her. She has the beautiful yellow hair of an angel.

I think of her like an angel and know I could never [several words are scratched out] a girl like that, but I sure wish I could. I have watched her many times and she acts happy. I am glad. Angels should be happy.

I have been saving my money. I thought if I had enough money, I could ask the angel to take her to dinner and maybe

buy her something nice. But I don't think I ever can.

Anyhow I am ashamed because I took some of my money and went and bought a woman tonight. I feel so bad, it was an awful thing and I am sorry for doing it. I guess I was a little crazy. All I wanted was the angel but I went out and paid for earthly pleasure because I was so full of wanting.

I think of her all the time but I can't ask her to go out with me or anything after what I did.

Now I know I am never going to get anything from life like what I want. And that is why I am saying goodbye.

Ritter let his breath out slowly. "That's a hell of a last will and testament, isn't it?" He walked away and stood by the window, which was double-hung and looked out over an alley. Trapped in the panes of glass were scars of light that he stared at blindly. "It's early," he said, "and I feel tired already."

Snowcroft cleared his throat. "There's nothing in the desk except a Bible and some paperback books, a few receipts, pay stubs, things like that. No letters, no addresses, and I've gone through all the clothes, too. There's a hundred and twelve dollars in his wallet, union and social security cards, driver's license, and that's it."

Ritter turned around and looked at the room, then walked back to the desk and stared at a calendar thumbtacked to the wall above it. The days of the month that were past had been X'd through. A small radio sat atop the desk next to a mechanical alarm clock. He turned on the radio and moved the dial around, but all he got was static. He shut it off. "No telephone. No TV. No mail. No friends. No contact." He looked at Snowcroft, and when he saw the expression of concern on the sergeant's face, he drew himself up straight. "I'm all right," he said.

"Lieutenant," the landlady called. "There are some men here from the coroner's office."

"Let's go," he said to Snowcroft. In the hall, he briefed the other men and turned everything over to them, closing the door.

Mrs. Rosker was watching him expectantly. "Well?" she said. "Why did he do it?"

Ritter scowled. "It was like ringing up *No Sale* on the cash register," he said abstractedly, "day after day."

The landlady stared at him. "That's an answer?"

He looked down the hall. "Is there a young girl on this floor? A blonde?"

"Blonde like I'm a blonde," Mrs. Rosker answered, the corners of her mouth turned down² in disapproval. "But he wouldn't have had anything to do with her. She's a *nafka*."

"Still, I think I'll talk to her. Sergeant Snowcroft will escort you back down, Mrs. Rosker."

She looked at him as if he had just handed her a subpoena, but he smiled blandly and turned away. Snowcroft started inching his way toward the stairs, and after a few moments she followed, her jaw working.

"We appreciate your help, Mrs. Rosker," Snowcroft said. "And we realize what a strain this puts on you."

"No sale," she muttered. "*Vey iz mir*."

Ritter knocked on the door of 3A, counted to ten, then knocked again, harder.

When he heard movement inside, he took out his ID packet and held it next to the doorframe at chest level. The door opened on a chain, the sleepy eyes took in the shield and ID card, and grew wider with alarm.

"Does that *yenta* know you're here?" she asked, snatching the chain off the door and opening it to look down the hall. She seemed relieved to find the hall empty. "So whadda you want?"

Ritter gazed at her. She was close to thirty, he guessed. Without makeup her eyes were washed-out and empty, and framed by dark circles. Her hair, obviously bleached, stuck out from her head in stiff tufts that looked brittle, like filaments of spun mica. She stood barefooted in a white terry cloth robe with a torn pocket and a large stain down the front that was probably wine. He put his ID away and asked her if she knew Thomas Wayne Hutchins.

"Nah." She pulled the robe tightly around her as if for protection.

Ritter pointed down the hall. "He was your neighbor."

"The *creep*?" She made a face. "That guy's weird. I smiled at him a couple of times, just friendly-like, you know, but he hung his head and moped off like a sad sack. Freak. So, lately, every time I see him I start humming or whistling and trot right past like he's not there."

"He's not any more."

"What'd he do, skip out?"

"All the way," Ritter said. "The long goodbye."

Her eyes were flat and emotionless.

"I thought you might want to know."

"Told you he was weird. That all you wanted?"

"He seemed to think highly of you. I just thought I'd tell you."

She shrugged. "It don't matter now, does it?"

"No sale," Ritter said softly.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. It's all over. Go back to sleep."

She closed the door, then yelled through it, "I ain't my neighbor's keeper!"

Ritter plodded down the stairs. Snowcroft was waiting in the foyer alone and held the door open for him when he got there. Once outside they both took deep breaths. Snowcroft said, "For some reason, Mrs. Rosker didn't want to talk to me much."

Ritter made a little snorting sound through his nose and headed down the steps. "Let's go to the union first, get a line on his job, see if we can find—" He halted, glaring back at the apartment house. "Somebody," he finished finally. "If not next of kin, maybe *somebody*."

"There's no hurry, is there?" Snowcroft asked as they reached the car.

"No, there's no hurry."

"Maybe we ought to take a breather, get a cup of coffee."

"Okay."

Snowcroft glanced around. "I was born about six blocks from here. You'd think I might see somebody I know, wouldn't you?" He looked at Ritter across the roof of the car. "But the city's full of strangers. It's the way things are."

Ritter nodded in resignation.

Snowcroft looked up and down the street as if trying to measure it against some memory. "By the way, what's a *nafska*?" he asked.

Ritter shook his head. "It isn't an angel."

"That's what I figured," Snowcroft said.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

AN OLD by Don



Illustration by Hank Blaustein.

CHARGE

Marquis_____

Malkin stared at the curio, and a tremor shook his meagre frame. Chilled and wet and dirty he was, with the slush of a New York February day soaking through his broken shoes, and its drizzle in his hair, a panhandler and a bum, and there, not a foot from him, with only the antique dealer's window between, was possible wealth in this old flintlock pistol, and nobody in all the world could know of it but himself. For an insane moment he fought with the impulse to dash his raw hands through the glass and risk everything in a snatch and a run.

But he conquered that instinct; that meant almost certain capture, and a cell, and Malkin was afraid of prisons; he knew them; he had had enough of them. He turned to the pal who stood beside him on the upper Sixth Avenue sidewalk, his heartstrings within him and his rags without fluttering with his feverish eagerness, and stammered:

"P-p-peachy, how m-m-much you got left?"

Peachy, who was, if anything, colder and wetter and dirtier than Malkin himself, and more obviously under the influence of bad whisky, drew from a sodden pocket a little sodden wad of bills, together with some silver coins, and extended the money in his grimy hand.

*"An Old Charge" from A VARIETY OF PEOPLE by Don Marquis. Copyright 1929 by Don Marquis.
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"Six dollars and thirty-five cents," muttered Malkin, clawing it over, "and I got four sixty. That's ten ninety-five we got." The men had worked for two days shovelling snow, and had earned sixteen dollars each; today they had been drinking it up. But this residue was enough. The tag tied to the pistol in the window announced its price as seven fifty.

There could be no doubt about the pistol itself; Malkin knew it. There was the broken trigger guard, there were the little rusty pockmarks at the muzzle end of the big steel barrel, and there were the dents, deep and irregular, in the softer brass which bound the heavy butt. He remembered when Jane had made those dents, using it to drive nails with the day she hung the pictures in their flat, and he chuckled at the thought of that queer half-domestic interlude in his irregular life, and at the thought of Jane; who had always had a craving to be respectable even while she loved to fling about the proceeds of his thievery. But even Jane had never known what he had hidden in the barrel of that old weapon. There might be—how much? Forty thousand dollars? Fifty thousand, in diamonds and emeralds, and those three rubies? Sixty thousand? There yet—if no one had found out! There yet, embedded in the sealing wax which he had poured in, molten, along with them, the day after he had cracked that swell crib over in Westchester, ten years ago.

There yet—or, maybe, gone! He twitched and jerked with his excitement, and when he spoke to Peachy again he gibbered for a moment before he could school his tongue to articulation.

"Peachy," he said, "we're gonna buy that pistol. See? That pistol there. See?"

Peachy giggled, uncomprehendingly. He had never, at any time of his life, been able to comprehend much; he was a bum because he was a bum, and it had been years since he had tried to think out why, or even wondered about it.

"Let's get a drink," he suggested.

"We're going to buy that pistol there," insisted Malkin. "Peachy, I know a man who'll give us fifty dollars for that pistol, and I'll give you half of it. Twenty-five dollars, Peachy—think of it, twenty-five dollars!"

"What we want with twenty-five dollars?" said Peachy, "I got money!" And he giggled again as he looked at the wet dollars in his dirty hand. "I ain't gonna buy any pistol; I want a drink."

Malkin, in his excitement, could have leaped upon the creature and strangled him; but again he controlled himself. As he looked upon him he forgot that he was a bedraggled bum himself; he remembered his clean and prosperous years, his days of fine clothing and agreeable amusements and good food and decent beds, the days when he had been spoken of by other crooks as the slickest member of a swell mob. And now he yearned with a longing that was agony for cleanliness and physical decency and ease again. He whispered something like a prayer. "Oh, God," he said, "I've been straight for years, and I'll keep straight." He even had a hazy picture of himself making money out of the proceeds of the jewels, and living decently upon the money he made, and restoring the worth of the jewels to the people from whom he had stolen them ten years before. "Oh, God," he promised, "I'll go and hunt up my old man, and make things easy for him." It was the first time he had so much as thought of his father in more than five years. "Oh, God," he said, "I never wanted to be a crook in the first place." Which was, of course, a lie. Malkin had ceased to steal because his prison terms had broken his nerve, which was never very strong; he had, essentially, neither the stamina for steady virtue nor for successful crime; and since his last release from jail five years before he had shuddered away from all thoughts of contact with the law out of sheer cowardice. It was cowardice that had made him a bum, not his "reform," as he called it now.

Suddenly he turned on Peachy with an intensity that penetrated even that wavering nondescript's armor of idiocy, and said: "Hand me that money, or I'll have you pinched!"

"'S my money," said Peachy, but his hand relaxed, and Malkin took it. But once inside the curio dealer's shop, Peachy's vague sense of justice reasserted itself more resolutely. "'S my money," he said, sullenly, "and it's gonna be my pis'l, too!"

Suppose the jewels were not there! But they *must* be. Malkin would not let himself even consider the alternative.

"How m-m-much," he said, stammering again with his emotions, "is that pistol there?"

The shopkeeper looked at the two bums coldly and dubiously, pulling at his scraggly gray beard and frowning, before he answered.

"The price is marked on it plainly enough," he said. "Seven dollars and fifty cents."

"What I meant was," said Malkin, "I want to buy it." And he extended the seven fifty in a hand that shook—all of Peachy's money, and a little more than a dollar of his own.

The dealer took the old weapon from his window, but he held it doubtfully, without handing it over. Malkin was all one tremble—would the man, in this last moment, find out? Himself, he had no doubts. The jewels must still be there . . . Oh, God! They *must!*

"What do you bums want with it?" said the dealer, looking from their bedraggled clothing to the little pools of dirty water than ran from their shoes to his clean floor.

"'S my pis'l—wanna buy a pis'l," said the imbecile Peachy, with the halfwit's sudden change of front. And he giggled feebly once more, holding out his hand.

"I don't know," said the antique dealer, "that I ought to sell it to you bums." He considered, while Malkin turned sick again at the possibility of his refusal. Finally he said, "But it ain't a weapon, it's a curio."

"Wanna buy a curio," said Peachy, now childishly pleased with the idea of owning the thing. "This pis'l here's my li'l curio!" And he snatched it.

"For God's sake," said the dealer, turning pale, and stepping back, as Peachy began to swing the thing in shaky circles, and point it here and there, "don't handle it that way! You can't tell what's in it—one out of ten of those things has a rusty old charge in it. It might go off any minute."

"Jus' a li'l old curio," giggled Peachy. "'S my pis'l!" And he patted the thing affectionately, flushed with a child's pride of ownership. He had only had it thirty seconds, but already Peachy loved it, as a child loves a new toy, and his attitude dared the world to try and take it from him.

"Has *this* one got anything in it?" ventured Malkin, hoarsely.

"I never look in 'em," said the dealer. But he took hold of the barrel, while Peachy still clung jealously to the butt, and thrust a long lead pencil down it. "May be. Something there—God knows what." He squinted at the barrel and the pencil, estimating the bulk of what was in it. "May be some thundering old load that's been there forty years. May be mud."

"'S my pis'l!" said Peachy, with his foolish laugh, and passed out of the door, hugging it in his arms.

Malkin followed, his hot heart thumping in his lean chest—for now he was certain! The jewels were there. He began to consider. First he would dispose of one of them; sell it for what he could get. Then he would get himself new clothes, a place to live, the decencies of life; he would get himself a credible "front"; he would need that as a vantage from which to market the rest of them; it would have to be done cleverly, and leisurely, and without any indication that he needed money, if he were to get anything like full value out of them. It would have to be done by a person who looked and acted as if he might logically and legitimately own such things. And then . . .

The thought of rehabilitation came over him again so strongly that he stood fixed on the slushy sidewalk almost as one in a trance: the vision of the things he might do, the life he might lead, the pleasures that would be his, the clothes he would wear, the shows he would see, the dinners he would eat, the wines he would drink, the people he would talk with, the books that he would read as one having a right to read them, the trips he would take. He would go to Paris; he had been there once, years ago, and he had always wanted to go again. He could see himself aboard ship, surrounded by pleasant companions; he could see himself in the card room—but he'd play a straight game! In all the world at that moment there was possibly no human being who so ardently desired honesty and decency as Malkin; who so shrank away from and abhorred the idea of anything crooked. He was only thirty-nine, and seven of those years he had spent in prison. How was it that he had ever become a crook in the first place? He stood and wondered, his brows contracted. He had been clever and he had been luxurious and he had been vain. It had started with cashing bad checks; it had gone on with cheating at cards, which was easy for him, for he was possessed of a most unusual digital dexterity. And the first confessed crook whom he had ever met, he had met in a card game; the man had spotted him, and had not exposed him, and had said to him later that a person as clever as he with his hands should have just the touch for safes. He was twenty-three then; by the time he was twenty-five he had made a reputation in the criminal world. And after that there was easy money, and every desire gratified; and then prison . . . and then easy money again. Until at the last he had lost his nerve. But now: "*Oh, God!*" he whispered, "*I can make something of my life yet! Let me, let me, let me make*

something of it!" And out of his trance he reached for the old curio.

"'S my pis'l," said the idiot Peachy, and caressed it tenderly, and thrust it into the ragged pocket of his overcoat farthest from Malkin. "'S my li'l curio pis'l . . . and I'm gonna go an' shoot taxicabs with it." So many taxicabs had nearly hit Peachy during his two-day stint of snow shovelling that he had conceived a crazy grudge against all machines of this species.

Malkin stared at him with contracted brows, considering. Presently he said: "Peachy, I've got some money left. Let's go and get that drink."

Peachy grinned and followed him, and presently the two of them sat at a table in one of the grogeries of the grimy district known as San Juan Hill, with glasses of thirty-cent gin before them. In the days before Prohibition this stuff, or something not quite so bad, was dear at ten cents a glass; now, at thirty, it was cheap. "I'll get him drunk," said Malkin to himself, "and just quietly take it from him. And then, some day, I'll look him up and slip him a hundred or so." And the resolve to slip Peachy a hundred or so made Malkin feel virtuous and deserving of the luck that would soon be his. He drank nothing himself; he bought drinks for Peachy, who, nothing loath, absorbed them.

"Peachy," said Malkin, after the poor ruin had poured into himself his third glass of the vile concoction, "let's look at that curio of yours."

The other looked at him with red-rimmed eyes into which there crept straightway a look of drunken cunning.

"'S my pis'l," he said, pressing his hand against the pocket in which it was hidden. And he began to speak of himself in the third person, as a very small boy might do. "'S Peachy's pis'l," he asserted. "Peachy's gonna shoot taxicabs." And then, with a crazy, half-completed association of ideas: "Peachy's gonna go all over N' Yawk shootin' Fourth o' July taxicabs!"

Pleased with this glorious programme, Peachy laughed idiotically and added: "Bang! Down goes taxicab! Fourth o' July!"

"Let me show you how to load it," offered Malkin craftily.

"'F you show Peachy how load it, Peachy never, never gonna git pis'l back again," said Peachy, leering with a craftiness which, Malkin felt, for all practical purposes matched his own. And then Peachy asserted confidentially: "Hunners and hunners in pis'l right now, hunners of loads. 'Cheen gun. Shoots all day. Shoots all night.

Hunners and hunners!" Then he patted his pocket again, sentimentally, affectionately: "Peachy's pis'l! Peachy's pis'l is Peachy's bes' frien'. On'y frien' Peachy's got left in the worl'. Shoo' taxicabs for Peachy. 'Venge on taxicabs!" Maudlin over this great brotherly love that had sprung up between his pistol and himself, Peachy gave way to tears.

How much gin was it going to take to make the animal helpless, Malkin wondered. And if he became helpless in this place could Malkin get the curio from him without attracting attention? He had better not risk it. He tried another tack.

"Peachy," he said, "suppose you buy another drink. My money's all gone."

He had to repeat it before it meant anything to Peachy's wandering and feeble mind; then the bum began a slow and painful search for money, finding nothing.

"No money," said Malkin, accentuating the situation, and watching him. "You have no money. I have no money. And we've got to have another drink."

Then he waited; he wanted the thought to come to Peachy without anything more definite from himself. Presently it came.

"Wanna drink," said Peachy. "No money." Then a pause, while the idea glimmered on his mental horizon like a false dawn, and faded out again, and rose once more. "Where's zis feller was gonna give me fify dollars for li'l pis'l?" he inquired plaintively.

"Come on," said Malkin, "I'll take you to him. He lives on the other side of the park, uptown."

They stepped out into the rainy dusk and presently stood on the southwestern rim of Columbus Circle, waiting for a chance to gain the park entrance on the other side of the monstrous eddy in New York's traffic, always swinging and swirling there. The lights were coming on, uptown and down, and great bands of golden brilliance trembled through the haze; and in the gray and purple distances prodigious towers thrust themselves up among the moving clouds, lifting here and there a burning star into the evening sky. Malkin caught his breath with a sudden sharp perception of the city's strange beauty that was like a pain. It had been years since he had noticed beauty, anywhere, in anything; but now hope was living in the man again; hope, marvellously resurrected from a mouldy death; and all his faculties and sensations were wakened up once more and keen. In front of him the cabs and private cars streamed

by, their many lights weaving a thousand kaleidoscopic patterns on the wet pavements, and their seats filled with happy, well-dressed people—and in a month, or less, he told himself, he would be one of those people, happy, well-dressed, laughing, in his own car, speeding through the glamorous dusk in pursuit of pleasure. And maybe with a goodlooking woman by his side.

A woman! How he had loved women; how he had suffered, in prison, and since he had been a bum, for the lack of them! Women, and jewels. He had stolen for women; he had given them money; he had given them jewels. "Women came pretty near being my ruination," he murmured to himself, as he and the straggling Peachy picked their way to the park entrance through the halted traffic. And he said it without any consciousness of its ironical humor, for with this new start in life he was ceasing to think of himself as an outcast; already, in his own mind, he had the things he hungered for. "I ain't gonna let 'em do it this time," he said. And then he carefully rephrased the thought, using the language he would have used ten years before. "I'm not going to let them do it this time," he said, and braced his drooping shoulders.

"Redhaired Jane," he said reminiscently, and sat down on one of the park benches. As if in answer to Malkin's mental suggestion Peachy sat down, too, without a word of protest. The drizzle was ceasing; there was a look about the sky as if it might blow free of clouds before long; the next step in Malkin's campaign had suddenly become as clear to him as if the rising breeze had lifted the fogs from his own mind. He would simply sit here with Peachy until the latter, already more than half gone with gin, fell asleep. Then he would take the pistol and make off. Malkin watched the other man, waiting for his chance, and said nothing; and as he watched and waited half his brain was still busy with visions of the past and of the future. There was redhaired Jane, who had wanted so badly to be respectable, and the flat she had fixed up for them so attractively, and her leanings toward domesticity, and her frightful extravagance, her emotional appeals to him to go straight, and her frank greed over the loot when he had made a good haul. A queer one, she had been, and a contradictory one.

He wondered what had become of her. Not that he was sentimental about her; but he wondered. He had not seen her since that afternoon when he had been pinched the last time; the afternoon succeeding the night in Westchester when he had got away with

the Carter jewels. He had told her nothing about them; early in the morning he had poured them into the old pistol, along with the wax, intending to begin to market them months later, when interest in the robbery had blown over. He had intended, as a matter of fact, to "hold out" on Jane; never to tell her about them; for what she got her clutches on she spent with the most appalling rapidity. And Malkin, by that time a wary and experienced criminal, was always uneasy unless there were a few thousand dollars somewhere stowed away with which to pay a lawyer in an emergency, or make a sudden getaway. And that afternoon he had been pinched; not for the Carter jewel robbery—he had never even been suspected of that, to this day—but on an old charge. An old charge that he had thought he was safe from months before. It was one of the things that had broken his nerve, this arrest on account of a half-forgotten job, this sudden leaping to life again of what he had considered a dead issue. He had pleaded guilty, and taken a short sentence; and then, through the devious channels of the underworld, he had tried to get in touch with Jane, to tell her of the jewels hidden away, and how to dispose of them against his release. But he learned, in due course of time, that she had sold every article of furniture in the apartment, and sublet it, and vanished; and that was all he ever had learned of her, then or later. He wondered if her wish to turn respectable had ever worked into anything; but the more he thought of that, the less inclined he was to laugh at it. Was it not exactly what *he* wanted . . . ?

Peachy was nodding. Malkin slipped nearer him on the bench and stealthily extended his hand toward the pistol.

But instantly the other was awake, and alert.

"'S my pis'l!" he said challengingly, and clapped his hand to it.
"'S my money bought that pis'l!"

"I know it, Peachy, I know it," acquiesced Malkin. He was grateful, at any rate, that Peachy did not demand to be led forthwith to the unknown philanthropist who was to pay him fifty dollars for it.

"'F you know it's Peachy's pis'l," said Peachy, quite logically, "whatcha tryin' to reach into Peachy's pocket after it for?" All his former affectionate regard for the weapon seemed to have returned to him; Malkin gathered that he would not part with it now for ten thousand dollars or thirty thousand drinks of bootleg gin.

Malkin realized that he had made a false move. He would have

to wait until the bum was quite asleep, and then move carefully. Presently Peachy began to nod again. But just as Malkin thought his head was about to rest permanently upon his breast Peachy suddenly straightened up once more and grabbed convulsively at his midriff.

"Whatcha wanna hit a feller for?" he said reproachfully.

"I didn't hit you, Peachy," said Malkin.

"Yuh didn't?" Peachy seemed astonished. "Somebody hit me," he said, still with one hand on his stomach. And then, after an interval of wheezy, half-articulate cogitations: "Zat's the *gin*. Gin's what hit me." He was silent for a moment, and then came out of the depths of thought with another pearl of wisdom. "All them fellers 'at sells zat gin oughta be *shot*. Oughta be shot with Peachy's li'l old bootleg pis'l—sellin' *zat gin*!"

"Let me have your pistol," said Malkin. "I'll take it and start shooting them for you."

"Shoot 'em m' ownself," said Peachy. He moved farther away on the bench from Malkin, and leered at him knowingly. "You don't wanna shoot 'm; I know what *you* wanna do; *you* wanna steal Peachy's pis'l."

He began to nod again, after a bit. But Malkin was not going to be premature; he would wait this time. As he sat and watched Peachy it became more and more difficult for him to believe that he had ever been a bum like that, or ever again could be—and this in spite of the draggled clothes still upon him, and the soaked shoes, and the four days' growth of beard. How was it that he had come down to herding with such as Peachy?

Malkin struggled with an unfamiliar moral problem: "When I was a crook," he said to himself, trying to puzzle it out, "I had lots of money, and everything I wanted—barring the stretches I did in stir. And then I turned honest, and I had no luck. I couldn't get a job, or hold a job; and I went down and down—until I looked like *that*. But I stuck to being honest, in spite of it." Mentally, he took credit to himself for virtue; one half his mind refused to let the other half know that it was the cracked nerve that had kept him from stealing. "Well, I'm glad I did stay honest—that's why this luck is coming to me now."

Thinking of the comparative wealth that would presently be his, a vast, vague sentimentality began to suffuse his being. He would do good things for people, he vowed. First of all, he would go and

hunt up the old man, his father. How old was he now . . . let's see: not more than sixty-five, if he was still living. The old man had always been good to him, as a kid. He remembered the first sled the old man had bought him; they had gone together to the hardware store to buy it. He could see himself, a shy, freckled-faced kid, looking up to his father, and wanting to thank him, and not knowing how, and digging the toe of one boot into the calf of his other leg. And the old man had told him to be careful about coasting down the long hill with the railroad tracks at the bottom, and given him an affectionate box on the ear, and held the door open for him as he went galloping off with the new sled to join the other kids. It was February—the kids in that little Pennsylvania town would be coasting down the long hill now. Suddenly, with the facile emotionalism of most weak characters, Malkin began to yearn for the little town itself. He felt ashamed of his reawakened appetites and desires of half an hour before—his yearnings after cars and women and the pleasures of the metropolis. Home was the place for him; the quiet and safety and sanity and peace of home; he knew it now.

He had been lusting for pleasures before; now, he told himself, he was really yearning to be decent. He had suffered—yes, that was it! He had suffered, and the reward of his suffering was a truer appreciation of the values of life! He would take this money, and he would go home; he would make the old man happy; he would go into business, there among his own people, on this capital, and he would prosper, and he would pay back again to the Carters the value of these jewels of theirs. He was conscious of an inward glow of virtue. "I was never *really* a thief, never a thief at heart," he told himself. It was an accident that he had got in wrong with that first bad check; and accidents had happened again and again after that. It was an accident that he had loved jewels and women, and so had kept on after he had got started wrong. He had conquered all those old lusts now, he told himself. He would do good to people; he would do good to lousy outcasts like this Peachy here, he would be kind, he would help the world along. He had never been a crook at heart; life had merely made him *seem* a crook!

He began to feel positively noble.

The man whom he was planning to rob now sat with his head sunk upon his breast, and Malkin thought his time had come at last.

Malkin rose and stole to the other side of him and swiftly reached for the pistol.

But Peachy, with the incalculable instincts of drunkenness, started awake and to his feet.

"You lemme alone," he cried. "I know whatcha want! You want my pis'l!"

"Give it to me!" cried Malkin hoarsely, dropping all disguise. He shook with rage—this bum, this dreg, this crazy thing, still between him and all that he had visioned! "Give it to me, or by God, I'll kill you!" His voice was vibrant with insanity.

Peachy shrank back before his appalling fierceness; and then, as Malkin leaped like a wolf at his throat, threw up his hands to ward off the attack, and the old curio was knocked and crushed between them as their bodies met. There was a flash and a roar, and Malkin fell into the slush with sixty thousand dollars' worth of jewels in his heart—without time to reflect that if this, too, were an accident, it was precisely the kind of accident for which his life had been a logical preparation.

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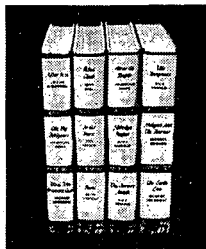
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